

FRESH SUPPLIES

By Mike Fang

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Life is weird. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's not fair, or it's hard, but above all, it's weird. I could hear my phone ringing, but it was out of reach. I tried to untangle myself from my current predicament, but my houseguest reached the phone first. He answered my call in his customary manner.

"BAAUUUUUURRRRRRRRP!" I could only imagine how the other person on the line reacted to that, but it probably involved a lot of surprised fumbling of the receiver.

"Uhhhh, hello?" I heard from the phone, "Is this....Mike Fang?"

"Gunther, let me have that....," I said, reaching up and plucking the receiver out of a certain wolftaur's hand. "Sorry, THIS is Fang."

"Ah, good afternoon, Mr. Fang, my name is Trent Vickers and I'm with the Global Medical Administration. We have a job that we'd like to hire you for."

"Ahh, well you've-Gunther, stop that," I said; it's kind of hard to concentrate on a phone conversation when a big-bellied, German wolftaur is rubbing his upper gut against the back of your neck. Gunther just let out a throaty chuckle.

"I beg your pardon?" Mr. Vickers said.

"Oh sorry," I said in return. "My friend here just thinks it's funny to mess with me while I'm on the phone. I was saying you've called at a good time. I'm not currently working on any other cases, so I'm definitely free."

"Good to hear," Vickers said, "In that case, we'd like to set up a video conference with you at our local office so we can give you the details. The information we have is rather sensitive and we'd like to keep it as in-house as possible."

"Oh certainly, I underOOOMPH!" It was difficult, but from underneath the ball belly that Gunther had just power bombed onto my head, I could just barely make out Vickers saying "Mr. Fang? Are you there?" I flailed a bit in surprise, and slapped my free hand against Gunther's girth, making him laugh more, until I finally managed to get enough sense to push it up off my head and put the phone up to my ear again.

"Sorry, more distractions," I said. "I'd be free tomorrow or any time this week, whatever works best for you."

"Oh, no problem. It will take us a little while to get the people we need together; would the day

after tomorrow work?”

“I’d say that shMMMMPH!” I would have finished that statement, if it weren’t for the fact the wolftaur had just flipped me around and crammed my muzzle into his belly button. Gunther guffawed loudly as he used his forepaw to press my face against the firm, but still somewhat pliable bulk of his gut. I had to push hard against his strength, but I managed to get my face free just enough to raise the phone back to my head again.

“...that should work out just fine,” I said.

“Good. How does 10 that morning sound?” Vickers said.

“That...sounds...good to me,” I said, my strength starting to give out under Gunther’s continued pressing. The wolftaur was grinning down at me as he used his toes to scratch the back of my head.

“Alright then,” Vickers said. “Did you need directions to find our office?”

“I think I can find it,” I said, trying to keep the strain out of my voice as my nose was starting to descent into that navel again. “If you have a website, I can definitely look it up.”

“We do,” Vickers said. “Alright then, I’ve got you on our schedule; look forward to seeing you.”

“Sounds good,” I said, my strength about to give out. “I’ll see you then.” I hit the end call button just as my face plunged back into the wolftaur’s gut cavity. I gave up fighting it and let the ‘taur rub my head and shoulders against his gut as he let out deep, guttural laughs.

Life is weird. I thought. But it’s fun.

My engine ticked in the cool morning air as I climbed out of my car. The change in the seasons was bringing on frostier mornings, and my breath was briefly visible as I crossed the parking lot towards the sandy-colored stone office building in the downtown legal district. This was business-suit-and-briefcase territory, a place I wasn’t entirely unfamiliar with, though I’d never had call to enter this particular building before. The interior was pretty generic with the usual modular office furniture and cubicle partitions. A young gryphoness receptionist was sitting at the composite wood reception desk. She buzzed Vickers to let him know I’d arrived.

Trent Vickers turned out to be a middle-aged, black-and-white Great Dane about a head taller than me. Shaking my hand, he brought me quickly back into the office building, towards an elevator in the back.

“We just moved into this building about two weeks ago,” he said. “We’re still getting some of our systems set up.”

“I getcha,” I said. “Always fun trying to remember what you packed in which box, eh?”

“Heh, that’s right, or what you realize you left behind,” Vickers said as we climbed into the elevator. He punched the second floor button. “Actually, that’s sort of what we’d like you to help us with.”

“Unpacking?” I said, chuckling slightly. “Did somebody lose the keys to the executive bathroom?”

“Pfff, I wish,” Vickers said with a grin. “No it’s more serious than that. But I think my supervisor wants to be the one to lay things out for you.”

The Dane led me to a conference room where two other people were waiting. One was a beefy-looking razorback with carefully groomed hair, rolled up shirtsleeves and a noticeably shiny silver watch on his wrist, sitting at the conference table. The other was, to put it politely, one of the most physically unique people I’ve ever seen. In my life I’ve encountered my fair share of people that come from mixed heritage. Add to that the fact that physical modification is growing in acceptance in everyday society and I’ve become no stranger to some odd combinations of body parts. But the person I was seeing in front of me had just set a record.

Standing next to the boar was a guy with a combination of both wolf and centipede features. He was built somewhat like a taur or a naga, with a long, armored lower body outfitted with well over a dozen insect-type legs. His upper body, meanwhile, was that of an arctic wolf, pure white fur topped with a thick head of rich, lustrous black hair that would have turned Beethoven green with envy. On either side of his muzzle, just at the corners of his mouth, was a pair of black, sharp-looking insect mandibles, held open to allow his face to be clearly seen. Taur and naga individuals often have trouble wearing clothing for the lower body, and this guy was no exception. However, he was wearing a red polo shirt with the GMA’s logo on the breast pocket.

“Mr. Fang, this is my supervisor, Garrett Weslake,” Vickers said, the boar reaching across the table to shake my hand. “And we also have our field agent...”

“You can just call me Tao,” said the lupine half-invertebrate, also shaking my hand. “My full name is hard to pronounce if you don’t speak Japanese.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. “So, gentlemen, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“First, let me make sure we’ve got everybody else here...” Weslake said, tapping a tablet sitting on the table in front of him. A LED flat screen monitor that took up most of the wall at one end of the table flicked on. The screen was split with two video feeds, one of a male black goat sitting at a desk, the other of a female palomino horse in a laboratory of some sort.

“Mr. Fang, these are Tom Suppanovich, our head record-keeper, and Dr. Myra van Kort, our chief of chronic disease research.” I nodded to the two as Weslake continued.

“You see Mr. Fang; we’re a pretty recent addition to the U.N. We’re a sub-administration of the

World Health Organization that focuses primarily on medical technology and research. We provide funds to private researchers, gather information on recent and ongoing work in medicine and inspect medical facilities around the world for global standards of care.”

“We have been consolidating records of various facilities all around the world,” Suppanovich said in a thick Russian accent. “It’s been a long process, and in some cases, we’ve discovered discrepancies in the books of various hospitals, institutes, and so on.”

“I take it one of these discrepancies is the reason you’ve called me in?” I asked. Suppanovich nodded.

“Indeed,” he said. “While going over the books on a global disease research center, Tao discovered records of a cryogenic facility. Tao?”

“The records showed an unknown number of terminally ill patients were sent there from multiple medical facilities,” Tao said. “The patients were to be placed in cryogenic stasis as part of a research project to discover cures for their diseases. Since the time they were put in stasis, cures have been found for most of their recorded illnesses.”

“And have they been treated?” I asked. Tao shrugged.

“We would, if we could find them,” he said. I blinked hard.

“You can’t find an entire cryo facility?” I said incredulously. The assembled experts coughed and looked a bit sheepish. I began to feel like a bit of an ass myself.

“I mean, no offense, but that seems like an awfully big thing to miss,” I said.

“True,” Dr. van Kort said, finally chiming in. “However several things are making locating the facility difficult. First, these records are a decade old. They are also incomplete; from old news coverage, we’ve found the executives of the private center were embezzling funds through the facility, and in an attempt to cover it up, they tried to destroy the records of the facility; ALL the records, including its location. When questioned, the executives refused to acknowledge the place existed. It didn’t work and they were eventually convicted, but they always stuck to their story so they could drag out the proceedings through multiple appeals.”

“Damn,” I said, rather shocked. “That’s cold, no pun intended. But wouldn’t the staff that worked there be able to tell the authorities where they’d been working?”

“The facility was bleeding edge, for the time,” Dr. Van Kort said. “It was completely automated and self-sufficient; researchers would go there to pick up patients as needed for their research, then return them if necessary. What’s worse, it was located underground, and a search of all the center’s known property turned up nothing.”

This case sounded like it would be an uphill job. Not only that, but after so much time had passed, I couldn’t help but wonder if it would all wind up being for nothing.

“Not to be cold, again, no pun intended,” I said, “But after all this time, do you think there’s even a chance of these patients still being alive? The facility may have broken down by now.”

“According to the few records that didn’t get destroyed, the facility had high-capacity battery backups to power its systems,” Suppanovich said. “It would keep running as long as it held out, and that power source was designed to last for 15 years of continuous use, then have its batteries replaced as they wore out.”

“So there’s a chance,” I said, “but time’s getting short.”

“Exactly,” Weslake said.

“What about the center?” I said. “Is it still up and running? What has their current board had to say about it?”

“The center was bought out by a partnership of two pharmaceutical companies,” Weslake said. “Neither of them ever found out anything about the cryo facility from the original staff. Tao is doing everything he can to search for this facility, but unfortunately we’re spread thin and don’t have any other field agents we can put on this with him. That’s why we need your help.”

I nodded, rubbing my chin. These poor saps were stuck in the freezer, and their expiration date was looming. Having been in a similar situation once, saved by what some may call sheer luck but I’d rather call divine intervention, I certainly couldn’t turn my back on this one.

“Alright,” I said, “I’ll give it my best.”

I walked alongside Tao as he led me to the office where he had been going through some of the old files from the company that set up the vanished cryo facility. Apparently a lot of the computer files had been deleted, but the company had been slower to shred and incinerate the physical ones in the board members’ attempt to cover up their embezzling.

Watching the wolf-centipede (or wolfipede, as he later told me he referred to himself) was something of a trip. He had to have well over a dozen armored legs, yet they moved with a seamless, almost fluid motion. Tao kept his lower body moving mostly straight, but he’d occasionally make a little deviation in his path, and it would cause a ripple in his flowing, segmented torso, like doing a whip crack with a garden hose and watching the bend travel down the length.

“I hope I’m not stepping on your toes here, getting called in like this,” I told him as we neared his office.

“We’ll I’ve got plenty to spare,” he immediately quipped back, giving me a smile before holding his hand up. “Nah, no hurt feelings. I’m glad to have someone else to work with, honestly. I was

starting to get both stumped AND swamped.”

The wolfipede pushed the door button to his office. Immediately I could see why he’d feel that way. There had to be at least 30 cardboard filing boxes stacked on the floor, on the L-shaped desk that occupied the far corner of the room, and filled the chair Tao wouldn’t have been able to make use of anyway. I blinked hard at the sight of backed-up bureaucracy.

“Damn,” I said. Tao nodded and crosses his arms.

“Yep, it’s a mess,” he said. “‘course it’s not the worst one. You should see the backlog we’ve got from Proctor & Gamble. The files from their Pepto Bismol division alone fill three cargo containers.”

“I’ll bet,” I said. Taking off my coat and rolling up my sleeves, I sighed; paperwork is never a fun part of my job, but it’s one I’ve become accustomed to. Thankfully the boxes were dated and stacked in order, so Tao and I started on either end and began working towards the middle. Paperwork is inevitable in my line of work. It’s hardly the most glamorous or exciting part, but it’s important; the paper trail is sometimes the only one left to try and follow a perp, using strings of purchases, registrations, travel records and the like to follow someone’s movements. With big entities like a company, those documents are even more telling, though often more complicated due to sheer volume.

I was starting to get eyestrain after going through the tenth box of what I’m pretty sure were TPS reports. I know they have a technical name, but from what I’ve heard office workers say about them, I’m pretty sure that stands for Totally Pointless Shit. Finally, when I was about to suggest we break for a very late lunch, I saw a page at the very back of the file I was going through.

“Aaaahhh,” I said, and Tao looked up from the papers he’d been going through.

“Find something?” he said. “Please tell me there’s light at the end of this tunnel.”

“I think so...,” I said, tracing my finger along the printed lines. “This is a quarterly shipping report from about ten years back; and there’s a couple items here...two pickup records and the items in question were ‘treatment testing-LS.’ I think....” I flipped to the index of the report. “Yes! LS stands for ‘Live Subject!’”

“That sounds right,” Tao said, looking over my shoulder. “So who picked them up?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, starting to get discouraged. “They listed their customers by code numbers.”

“Oooh! I saw a manifest with a customer code list in here somewhere...what year was that from?” Tao began going all around the room, flipping open boxes. I found myself surrounded on two sides by wolfipede as he dug through the files, finally locating the appropriate document.

“Got it! One of those is for the Tattel Immunology Research Center...and the other was for a

MalaDex Inc., apparently some military contractor.”

“Military?” I said. “What, were they creating biological weapons?”

“No, I vaguely remember reading about them in some of my other work; think they did vaccination research for soldiers fighting overseas,” Tao said, flipping the folder shut.

“Alright then,” I said. “We’ve got two names of companies that’ve actually been to this facility. Let’s pay them a visit.”

“Right,” Tao said, starting towards the door. He stopped after about two steps, then turned and looked at himself all over the room.

“Riiiiight after I untangle myself,” he said.

Scenery was slowly scrolling by the window like the background in an old 2D platformer. We’d been traveling through farmland for the last 20 minutes or so since the sun set, giving me little to look at. Fortunately I’d had the foresight to download a novel to my tablet before Tao and I started on our trip, so I wasn’t completely without distractions.

A fast internet search had quickly led us to the closer of the two agencies that had been in direct contact with the lost cryo facility. The Tattel Center had been bought out since the time of its project involving one of the facility’s patients, but a call to its new parent company revealed that most of the original staff had been kept on. We weren’t able to get up that day with anyone working there, but both Tao and I decided not to just wait around for a callback; instead, we booked tickets on the first train to Montpelier, where the Vermont-based center was located.

“So why exactly did you decide to take up this case?” Tao asked. We’d managed to book a cabin that was built to accommodate “gifted” passengers such as him, with a low, oval-shaped bed he could curl up in, along with an inclined pillow to give his upper body back support. The wolfipede was, in fact, positioned that way at the time, laptop set on top of one of his armored sections as he was typing. I looked up from my e-book.

“Well,” I said, “I guess part of the reason is I was in a similar situation as these poor suckers stuck in the freezer we’re looking for.”

“You were a cryo-patient?” Tao said, eyebrows raised. “Funny I don’t recall seeing any record of your treatment, and I had access to most of those from...”

“I wasn’t a patient,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “I was ahhh...a prisoner.”

“A pris...you mean back during the cryo-rehab surge in the 2010’s?” The wolfipede looked genuinely surprised. I couldn’t help but chuckle slightly.

“E’yeah,” I said. “I was one of those political prisoners, you might say. I wasn’t supposed to be frozen so long, but...” I went into an abbreviated explanation of how I’d managed to find myself in the current day and age. Tao listened with visible fascination.

“I’d heard the previous U.S. politics tended to be rather extreme,” he said, “But I never realized they went THAT far.”

“Yeah,” I said, looking out the window as we passed by several rows of wind energy turbines, silent spinning sentinels in the dark. “They were bad on either side of the playing field. Religious zealots and stringent traditionalists on one side...amoral s.o.b’s that wanted no personal responsibilities, even for their own actions on the other side.”

“So which were you?” The wolfipede asked, eyebrow raised and a smirk on his muzzle.

“What makes you think I was one or the other?” I said, give him an incredulous look. He just kept smirking.

“Why else would one side or the other lock you up for your politics?” The wolfipede said, running a hand through his hair. “If I’m any judge of character...I’m guessing you were on what they called ‘The Right Wing.’”

“You know you could make a decent P.I. yourself,” I said, smirking a bit and shifting on the sleeping cot I was stretched out across.

“Nah, I can’t rock a trench coat the way you can,” he said, making me snicker.

“But yeah, I was...am pretty right wing. I like to think I’m more moderate than some, but I’m still conservative when it comes right down to it,” I said.

“So I imagine you do a lot of call-ins to radio talk shows, forum debates...,” Tao said, going back to typing for a minute. I make a clicking noise in my cheek and looked ruefully out the window again.

“Not so much as I used to,” I said. “I’ve gotten burned out on the fight, you could say.”

“Yeah, debating politics isn’t easy,” the wolfipede said.

“That’s the truth,” I replied. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m not looking for universal agreement with me. BUT it’s been my experience that when you dissent from the popular opinion, people like to gang up on you. I haven’t been able to find more than a handful of people willing to publicly back me up. I think I’d be more willing to stand up and say something if I didn’t feel like every single debate I got into was me vs. the world; kinda hard to believe in your own side when it seems like absolutely NOBODY thinks you’ve got a valid point.”

The wolfipede reflected on that a moment before turning back to me.

"Popular opinion is fickle," he said. "If it doesn't agree with you, just wait five minutes. Quite frankly it's been my experience that the only person who is ever going to have your back a hundred percent of the time is yourself. Popular opinion be damned, there's always someone who is going to oppose you. You just have to take it in stride and soldier through the opposition. It's you or them, and don't let it be them."

I grinned.

"Amen brother," I said.

It was early the next morning when the train pulled into the station. Stepping off the train, I dug my hands into my pockets and pulled out a pair of black deerskin gloves; the frosty air was cold enough to make my breath visible. Tao zipped up a gray hoodie sweatshirt, pulling the hood on over his head and stuffing his hands into the front pockets.

"Why couldn't this company be someplace below the Mason-Dixon?" he said, shivering slightly.

"That'd be too easy," I said. "You gonna be alright?"

"Yeah, I'm not a complete stranger to cold," he said. "I've got my ways of keeping warm." That being said, the wolfpiede immediately leaned his upper body up against me and started rubbing against my side. I smirked and put an arm around his shoulders, rubbing his upper arm.

"C'mon let's get inside before we start getting frostbite," I said, grabbing my carry-on. The station was sparsely staffed, a skeleton crew there to handle the early-morning arrivals. There were probably only a couple dozen passengers on our arrival, so the crowd was spread fairly thin in the big, open arrival lounge. That's probably why I didn't have much trouble noticing the trio watching us.

They were sitting at one of the tables outside the in-house coffee shop. Tao and I had just stepped into the security checkout line when I noticed them. On the surface they seemed pretty average, a domestic cat with white fur with brown patches, a vixen with short cut black hair and a lanky-looking black horse. All of them were dressed in oddly thin jackets, but I figured at the time to the native Vermont folks this weather was probably nothing they weren't accustomed to. I wouldn't have given them a second thought, normally, except all three of them were staring directly at Tao and me. As I let the security guard sweep me with the combination metal detector and x-ray scanner (a thankful development in this future age from my previous one, making security lines a hell of a lot faster than back in the 21st century), I glanced around and in my peripheral vision, I realized the three loungers weren't just people-watching, or watching the line in general; they were focusing specifically on US.

What, they've never seen a hyena and a half-wolf half-centipede before? I thought. Well okay, maybe in Tao's case, no they haven't, but still...

As we headed out the door, I stopped to tighten my boot laces and to throw a glance back at the trio. They'd all gotten up and were heading for the exit themselves. Circumstances were starting

to pile up.

That or you're being paranoid, I thought, then immediately followed it up with *Yeah, doesn't mean they're not out to get us*. A quick stop at the in-station vehicle rental office got Tao and me a van to drive; a bit of a necessity given the wolfipede's legroom requirement. As I climbed into the driver's seat, I threw a glance around.

"Somebody following us?" Tao asked, sliding the side door shut behind him.

"Not sure..." I said. "Did you notice...?"

"Those three gawkers back in the depot?" Tao finished up. "Oh yeah. I'm used to being looked at, but those three seemed...I dunno, something was off about them."

"Yeah I felt it too," I muttered, turning the engine over. It had been a while since I'd driven a full-sized van. My folks used to have one, so I'd driven one some years back. The funny thing about vans is when you first start out, the height of the vehicle makes you feel like you're perched way up high and you worry for a bit about getting tipped over. But after you get used to it, going back to driving a regular car, you feel like your butt is flying along about an inch off the road.

The Tattel Center was easy enough to find, and a quick chat with their human resources director put us on the trail of Ned DeSilva, the lab tech who'd been in charge of candidate trials for a new Staph infection treatment. DeSilva wasn't on shift that day, so Tao and I got his home address and headed over there.

The sun was higher, but it wasn't any warmer by the time we got to DeSilva's apartment complex, a nondescript brown brick building in the shadow of an overpass. I pulled up to a parallel parking spot, having to work the van back and forth a few times before I felt comfortable we weren't hanging two wheels out into traffic. A frosty blast of air almost yanked my fedora off as I stepped out of the van. Tao shivered as well, his armored sections sounding like a maraca.

"This weather's gonna kill me," he muttered, looking down the street. I followed his gaze and saw he was looking at a coffee shop just a couple doors down.

"I'm gonna grab something hot," he said. "You want anything?"

"No thanks, I'm good," I said, clutching my coat shut. I went up to the mailboxes on the apartment building front step and picked out DeSilva's apartment.

"DeSilva's in apartment 15," I said, "I'll go knock on his door; meet you there." The wolfipede nodded and clattered down the sidewalk towards the smell of roasted beans and caffeine.

The apartment building was an older one, but still solidly built. Paint had flecked a bit off the front hallway arch leading to the Y-shaped staircase leading up in two different directions. I jogged up the black-and-white checkered steps, following the directional signs, hoping the rather

cold hallways weren't a sign the building's heating was out. I got to apartment 15 and knocked, glancing up and down the hallway as I heard some footsteps coming to the door.

"Who is it?" a rather harshly-toned voice said.

"Mr. DeSilva?" I said, digging into my breast pocket.

"Who's asking?" the voice replied. I pulled out my business card and held it up to the peephole.

"My name's Mike Fang, I'm a private investigator. I need to ask you some questions about a project you were involved in several years ago."

"I already told your friends I've got no God damn idea where that cryo facility is, so quit harassing me before I call the God damn cops!" the voice snarled. I blinked.

"Friends?" I said. "Sir I think you've got me mixed up with someone else; I'm the only...well one of the only two people the GMA has working on this, and the other guy hasn't been here before me, I know that."

"And that trio that showed up at my office yesterday, I suppose they were just collecting for charity!" DeSilva said. The "trio" part made me blink hard.

"Wait...was it a cat, a horse and a vixen?" I asked.

"Heh, thought you said you were the only ones working on this," DeSilva said, sounding vindicated. I tried not to get frustrated with him.

"Sir, I don't know who those three are, but I've seen 'em. I'd like to know what they said to you." There was a moment's pause; then I heard a deadbolt getting drawn back. The door opened and a white hare in sweats opened the door and gave me a look of askance.

"You really don't know those guys?" he asked. I shook my head.

"Nope, but they gave me a weird feeling," I said. DeSilva shifted his position a bit.

"Well...", he said, "They came 'round the office the other day, asking about a group of cryo-frozen patients that were part of a clinical trial I was involved in. They said they were reps from a private research firm, but they wouldn't give me a name, said the company wanted to remain anonymous, but it was doing some kind of genetic research and they wanted to locate the facility our previous volunteers came from."

"What sort of research were they doing?" I asked.

"Heh, they were vague on that," DeSilva said. "I didn't like the feel of them; too many unanswered questions and a severe lack of credentials. I told 'em I couldn't help them; they looked like they didn't believe me but hell, how're they gonna prove otherwise?"

“Hmmm,” I said, looking down the hall again. I was starting to get a feeling like someone or something was closing in. I chalked it up to just nerves at the time; I shouldn’t have.

“So –do- you know anything about where the facility’s located?” I asked. The hare gave me an appraising look.

“You don’t act as...off as those other people,” he said. “But nonetheless, how can I be sure you’re not just a better actor?”

“Fair enough,” I said. “I’ve got a contact with the GMA, Trent Vickers. You can call him and he’ll vouch for me. Plus the other guy with the GMA is with me; he just went for some coffee, he’ll be along in a minute.”

“Mmm, alright,” DeSilva said, tossing his head into his apartment. “Let’s give your Mr. Vicker’s a call while we wait.” I took a step into the apartment as DeSilva pushed the door shut behind me.

So you do know something,” said the cat I’d seen at the station, who was sitting at a small dining table just ahead of me. DeSilva jerked in surprise as he turned around. I’d only just noticed the cat myself; he’d been hidden behind the hare when I was standing out in the hall, and I hadn’t been looking straight ahead when I stepped inside. I had a brief moment to take in the lab tech’s apartment; a nondescript bachelor pad with a kitchenette to the left, a hallway just past it, a small living room just past the hallway with a half-wall counter leaving it open to the dining area just on the other side, a sliding glass door leading to a small balcony.

Sitting at the Formica table was that darn cat; I recognized the white-with-black-spots fur pattern and the navy jacket. He had a grin on his face that would’ve looked just right with a few canary feathers sticking to it. A soft tread on the left side drew my attention to the hallway, where the vixen stepped around the corner, arms crossed and eyebrow raised. The horse then emerged right on cue, stepping into the doorway of the kitchenette and leaned against the doorframe, hands in his pockets.

“The FUCK are you doing in my apartment?!” DeSilva yelled. The trio seemed completely unfazed by his anger; that wasn’t a good sign. I casually put my hands on my hips, in the process pushing my coat back so I could draw my gun quickly.

“When you wouldn’t cooperate with us,” the cat said, fixing the hare with a piercing look. “We thought we’d have to pursue other avenues to get information. But our employer said ‘stay on him, something will probably come loose.’ And lo and behold, here we are.” The cat stood up from the table. “Now, we don’t have the patience to wait for you to fiddle around with this guy,” the cat tossed his head in my direction. “So make this easy for all of us and we’ll be on our way.”

“After you break in and pull this strong-arm routine?” DeSilva said with a snort. The cat rolled his eyes.

“I figured as much,” he said. The horse was so good at taking cues; he should have been an actor. Immediately he shot out a hand and grabbed the hare by his throat, pulling him around in an arc and slamming him into the wall. I went to throw an elbow into the equine’s face – even though he was a head taller than me, I could certainly still reach it) but he beat me to the punch. More accurately, he beat me to the kick, as he planted a hoof into my stomach and slammed me against the opposite wall. Pain went through my abdomen and my back from the force of the blow; I crumpled to the floor, not wanting to immediately get up. I could have pushed through the hurt, but I didn’t have a good opening and would have just been inviting a second blow, this time perhaps to something vital.

“You just stay out of this,” the cat said to me, walking towards us. He cradled one hand in the other, claws emerging from the fingertips. He rested that hand on the wall just over and to the right of the hare’s head. The lab tech was pulling at the horse’s hand around his throat, but the equine must have had a vice-like grip, because his arm wasn’t moving.

“We were running out of patience before, DeSilva,” he said, his voice taking on a harsher tone. “Now we’re just about empty.” He dragged his hand down the wall, claws digging parallel grooves into the plaster. “So spill it!”

I saw my opening; the cat had his back to me, and the horse was focused on holding his struggling prisoner, who despite the cold day was now sweating hard. I hauled back my leg and gave the feline a stamp kick to the back of his knee, causing him to lose balance and fall over with a surprised squawk. I hopped onto my footpaws in a crouch, narrowly dodging another kick from the horse. Springing upward and forward, I slammed the heel of my right hand into his torso, causing him to buckle enough for DeSilva to pull himself free.

That’s when the vixen stepped forward. “You two need to stop playing and take this seriously,” she said, clenching her fists.

“Oh I’m taking it REALLY serious,” I said. As the old saying goes, a gentleman doesn’t hit a lady, but she was no lady; not if her associates were any indication. I stood ready for her to make her move; the hare was leaning against the wall, coughing from the chokehold he’d been in.

“I was talking to THEM,” the vixen responded. She wasn’t close enough to put her hands on me, so I was rather surprised when I was suddenly grabbed by the throat. That’s when I saw them; a pair of rope-like tentacles that had shot out of the vixen’s coat sleeve. The vixen hauled back, and I was yanked forward, right into a waiting stamp kick to the chest that put me flat on my back, gasping for air.

“Where...the hell....did you get those?” I wheezed out as the tendrils slid back into the female fox’s sleeve.

“Don’t you wish you knew?” She said with a mean smile. The cat, meanwhile, had pulled himself back up and was dusting himself off.

“Secret’s out, I guess,” he said. His vertical pupils began to widen, further and further, until his

eyes looked like jet black marbles. Claws extended on both hands, longer than any natural feline would have, thickening as well until they were each a foot long and looked as wide and sharp as a stiletto blade. The horse, meanwhile, started to smile...and that smile drew further and further up his muzzle, unnaturally so for an equine. His jaw all the way up to his eyes opened in a downright crocodile-like grin, filled with razor-sharp teeth tinged with saliva that gave off an acidic smell I could detect even from several feet away.

“What...the...fuuuuuck...” I rasped, eyes darting from one assailant to the next. DeSilva, for his part, decided to try and take advantage of his natural strengths. The hare bounded for the door, throwing it open and getting one step outside before the horse caught him by the arm. He pulled the hare back into the apartment with such force he flew into the dining area, smashing into the table and then the patio doorframe.

“EASY!” the cat snarled, his voice now distorted, sounding harsher and grating. “We still need answers!”

“Looks like he’s out,” the vixen said, walking over to DeSilva and poking him with another tentacle from her sleeve.

“Damn,” the cat snorted. “We’ll just have to wait for him to come around. In the meantime...,” He turned and looked at me, as I was pushing myself up onto my elbow, reaching for my gun.

“No witnesses,” the cat said. I’d just put my hand on my revolver when I heard something from the door; a slurping sound. We all looked over. Standing just inside the doorway was Tao. The wolfipede was looking at the scene in the apartment with wide eyes, holding a latte he was sucking at through a straw.

Nobody moved for about five seconds. Then the horse, still bearing his teeth, marched up to the wolfipede. Tao continued to look in apparent shock at the trio of frankly mutated-looking thugs. I started to draw my gun, but the cat spotted me and put a sneaker-clad footpaw on my forearm. The horse turned and looked at the cat, nodding in Tao’s direction. The cat smirked, drawing one of his blade-like claws through the air just in front of his throat. Tao saw this, looking from the cat, to the horse.

To this day, I’m still amazed at how fast the wolfipede reacted. Tao let go of his latte, and before it had hit the floor, he’d fired off a dozen punches into the horse’s abdomen with the speed of a jackhammer! The horse buckled from the blows, putting his head in arm’s reach for Tao to clap his fists together on either side of his head like cymbals.

The cat looked like he was in shock, so I took my opportunity to give a good, hard yank on my gun arm, drawing my revolver and unbalancing the feline again, sending him to the floor once more. A pair of tentacles from the vixen wrapped themselves around my revolver, but I clenched down hard on it and refused to give it up. I fired off a shot, but from the vixen’s yanking back and forth, it missed her and shattered the patio window instead. Finally, the vixen gave a Herculean yank on my gun.

I'd been expecting that, and rather than fight it, I grabbed the barrel with my other hand and went with the pull, using it to launch myself at the tendril waving vulpine. I dropped my shoulder as I neared her, ramming the vixen to the wall.

Tao, meanwhile, was still squaring off with the horse. The equine snapped his gator-like jaws at the wolfipede, who dodged side to side to avoid them. A guttural snarl came from the mutated equine, and the way he hauled his head back was enough warning for Tao. The wolfipede shot up the WALL, just barely getting his last segments out of the way before a splatter of rank-smelling plasma came out of the horse's jaws and hit the floor in a splash the size of a bath towel, hissing into the floor as it melted the low-pile carpeting.

The wolfipede didn't stay on the wall, however; he continued to show off his arthropod abilities by climbing onto the ceiling, then suddenly darting down as the horse backed up a step and attempted to spit his acidic phlegm at Tao again. The wolfipede shot across the floor; in the space of three seconds, he entwined the horse in the coils of his centipede lower body and began raining punches to the equine's head like he was a training dummy.

The cat, meanwhile, had gotten back up and was revealing another ability he had. Seemed like Tao wasn't the only fast one in the room, as the feline seemed to dart from his position ten feet away to right in front of me so fast I couldn't follow him with my eyes! He swiped at me with his claws; it was only through sheer adrenaline and a sense of incoming danger I managed to get out of the way. He took another jab at me, and this time managed to cut me deep in the upper arm. I let out a snarl of pain, then introduced the cat's stomach to my knee. They didn't get along well, and the feline doubled over.

I immediately turned my attention back to the vixen, and a good thing too. She'd just recovered from my last assault and no less than ten tentacles, five from each sleeve, were coming towards me! I hunched over and turned my back to her so she couldn't find any purchase on my throat or other vital spots, but she could still get them around my torso, wrapping me in a grip like a python, and starting to crush me the same way. I could feel the blood rushing to my head, not to mention my breath getting shallow. Lurching away from the vixen, I managed to pull her off balance; that gave me the opening I needed to turn back towards her; my upper arms were pinned, but I could still bend my elbows, and I managed to raise up my revolver and blast the vixen in the chest, dropping her. I pulled myself free of the now loose tentacles when a vicious backhand caught me across the face, sending me sprawling to the floor.

Trying to get my vision to clear, I looked over my shoulder and saw that the horse had managed to break off Tao's pummeling somehow. The equine had him by the shirt, slammed up against the wall, and was preparing to spit a wad of acid right in his face. But Tao had one more trick up his sleeve; he grabbed the horse by the shoulders, pulled himself forward, and brought the pincers on either side of his muzzle together on the horse's neck. The equine let out a strangled gasp that didn't sound like the same one he made before he spat, and collapsed to the floor, dropping the wolfipede in the process.

Tao winced and shook his head, apparently dazed by getting slammed against the wall. That's possibly the only reason why he got caught off-guard by the mutated cat, who'd suddenly leapt

on him from the side. He caught a handful of the wolfipede's mane of black hair and shoved his face down hard against the floor. The feline put his knee to the back of Tao's upper body, his centipede lower half twisting and flailing like a snake trying to fight. The cat pulled Tao's neck back at a very uncomfortable-looking angle, sneering at him as he put those long, blade-like claws to the wolfipede's throat...

...and that's when I got a bead on the cat and drilled him with a bullet to the side of his chest, throwing him off Tao and down the hall. I panted a bit as I slowly stood, holding the cat in my arm.

"This case just got a whole new level of complicated," I said. I went over and checked on DeSilva; the hare still had a pulse, but I couldn't seem to wake him up.

"Damn," I muttered, pulling out my cell phone. I called for the police and an ambulance, then turned and looked around the apartment.

"I can't imagine we'd find much to help us out among his personal...Tao?" I'd been so amped up and preoccupied I had only just noticed the wolfipede hadn't answered. I turned and saw him twisted up in a ball, arms wrapped around his chest. His eyes were bugged out and he was rocking back and forth a bit, teeth clenched and making little whistling noises through his muzzle and nose.

"Shit, Tao!" I rushed over to his side and held his shoulders. "You alright?! Did they hit you somewhere, did they break something?!"

"Trying to kill me, trying to kill me, trying to kill me..." the wolfipede chattered rapidly, eyes darting all around. I didn't see blood or anything to indicate a serious injury; as far as I could tell, the wolfipede was in a state of shock over what just happened to him.

"Hey, easy bud, easy..." I said, putting an arm around his shoulders. "It's over, it's over..." Tao let go of his chest with one arm, took hold of my trench coat and clenched it. His armored plates rattled with his shivering, but I suspected it had less to do with the frosty wind coming through the broken glass door and more to do with his panicked expression. I squeezed him a little tighter.

"It's gonna be alright now, the police are coming," I said, trying to keep my tone as calm and even as possible. The wolfipede stopped baring his teeth openly and his eyes became less dilated. He slowly relinquished his death grip on my coat and seemed to relax more, though his lower body remained in a tightly coiled ball.

"Sorry," he said, "But sometimes when I get stressed out, I can have a panic attack."

"S'okay," I said, rubbing his arm. "I doubt you wind up having to face stuff like this very often."

"Heh, yeah, not exactly common for me," he said. "Is it all that common for YOU?"

I looked around the room with a rueful expression.

"More often than I'd like," I said.

The police station was warm and well heated; a blessing given the day's weather as Tao and I waited for the detectives to get back from processing the scene. After our scuffle with the trio, I'd quickly looked over DeSilva's personal effects, but couldn't find anything immediately helpful to us. His computer was password-protected and I didn't have any clue what it could be; his personal papers were the usual assortment of financial documents, receipts, membership invoices, and so on. As for DeSilva himself, last I heard the injuries he'd sustained had put him into a coma; he wasn't expected to wake up for us anytime soon.

Finally, Detectives Foster and Beswell returned; a blue and gold dragon and a bulldog respectively, the pair sat down in the interview room at a folding table across from us.

"Okay," The dragon said, setting a file down on the table. "We called the GMA and your backgrounds check out. We're running the forensics on the scene and we've traced the trio that broke into the apartment and attacked you back to a small hotel outside town."

"Anything that might tell us who they are?" I asked. Beswell scratched at his left jowel.

"Nothing to tell us who –they- were," the bulldog said. "But we did find a laptop with some emails on it. Seems they were in connection with a Dr. Oscar Quipple. Does that name mean anything to either of you?"

"Not to me," Tao said, looking in my direction. I shook my head; the name wasn't doing anything for me either. What I didn't mention was I had a hunch it might mean something to ANOTHER person I knew. With the Montpelier police satisfied, Tao and I booked a return ticket back home; Tao was ready to head to the other company that had been in contact with the cryo facility, but I wanted to know who we were up against a bit better before we went any further. I doubted anyone who had mutated hit men on their payroll was some small-time criminal; the fact they were apparently a member (or had been a member) of the scientific or medical community put them squarely in the circle of a certain acquaintance of mine.

The night air was cold, like we'd brought back some of the New England chill with us, as I weaved my way through the loading containers that were stacked in the shipping yard. The big, rectangular metal boxes made a natural maze, adding to the novelty of reaching the underground nightclub.

"So what kind of scientist works in some raver hangout?" Tao asked me. I smirked.

"The kind that doesn't want to be found," I said. The wolfipede chuffed in amusement.

"Sounds really reputable," he said.

"Yeah," I replied, "he's not quite what you'd call...distinguished, at least not anymore, but in his

day he was the reigning authority on genetic research.”

“So what happened?” Tao asked.

“Well, I’m kinda hazy on the details,” I said, “but from what I gather, he used to have an overblown ego and decided not to bother with a lot of the usual scientific ethics. In short, he fucked up something fierce and learned the consequences of his actions the hard way. Now he offers his services to those who couldn’t otherwise afford them; treating genetic illnesses, providing people with affordable modification services, that kinda stuff.”

“Huh,” Tao said, stuffing his hands in the pockets of the hoodie he was wearing. “Sounds like an interesting character.”

“He’s pretty colorful,” I said. “And just wait ‘till you meet his staff.”

We stepped around the last container and came upon a large, three-story warehouse. This close to the building, the sounds coming from inside were muffled, but audible; thumping bass and techno noises were rhythmically coming from it, and from the high-set windows, multi-colored lights could be seen flashing in time with the beat. I led Tao towards a side door under a single bulb light. Sitting on a stool just next to it was a pale-skinned human dressed like your average punk rocker, complete with a bright blue Mohawk. The door guard was tapping his fingers on a tablet when he looked up and noticed the pair of us.

“Evenin’ Fang,” he said. “Haven’t seen you in a while. Who’s the new guy?”

“This’s Tao,” I said, “new friend of mine; we’re hoping to get in on a good card game tonight; is the house dealer in?”

The guard gave me a knowing grin as he used his tablet to scan my membership card. “Oh yeah, he’s in. If I can just get a picture of your friend here for our records...” He held up his tablet, changing apps and getting a mug shot of the wolfipede.

“Awesome. You two have a good one, and behave yourselves,” he said, tapping the door button.

“We’ll try, but no promises,” I said with a wink. It wasn’t the first time I’d used that line, so the guy knew I didn’t mean anything by it. Tao followed me in as we stepped through the door, a heavy blast of thumping bass beat hitting us as we did. Technicolor laser lights put on an impressive show over the heads of a well packed dance floor, an unusually motley crowd of species and genders doing the age-old bump n’ grind. A blood red bat DJ was spinning discs up on the sound stage, fans crowding around to throw him tips, song requests, and the occasional scrap of paper with a scribbled phone number. Overhead on the far back wall, a large LCD sign spelled out the name of the club in letters that alternated in color and font: “The WereHouse.”

“So what do you think?” I said to Tao, raising my voice over the cacophony of electronic rhythms.

“I’m reminded of a line from a poem,” the wolfipede said. “A land of light and shadow where beasts dance and freaks are kings.”

“Think I heard that one,” I said, smirking. “Think it was a reference to the circus.”

“I’d say it still fits here,” Tao said, looking around. There was no doubt about it; this was one of the few places the wolfipede wouldn’t stand out too much. Most of the people at the club were just as oddball as he was, if not more so. Neon fur and hair colors were the norm, it seemed, and if you only had two arms and legs you weren’t in the majority anymore. Hybrids abounded all over the place, and some people didn’t appear to belong to any particular species known at all.

I lead Tao over to the bar. Several of the regulars were there, some of them drunk, the rest, working on it. I leaned against the countertop until Tandor, the bartender came over. He was a tall drink of water, but what else would you expect from a giraffe?

“Evenin’ detective,” he said in a southern drawl, polishing a glass. He was dressed to the nines in a white dinner jacket, matching shirt and slacks and a bow tie. Give him gray hair instead of the rusty-colored Mohawk he had and a bushy mustache and you would have had a dead ringer for Mark Twain.

“Ey there,” I said. “Busy night, it seems.”

“You betcha,” the giraffe drawled, flipping the glass and setting it on the rack behind him. “Plenty’a folks comin’ to th’ ol’ waterin’ hole. What can I getcha?”

“I heard the house dealer’s in tonight,” I said, glancing over my shoulder. “So I’ll have my usual.”

“Comin’ right up,” the tender said, mixing up a screwdriver for me and sliding it forward. In place of a coaster, however, he used a playing card that had been drawn on; a jack of hearts had been styled with drawn-in details that made him look like he’d been up all night nursing a hangover, with baggy eyes and stubble. Snakes twisted around his swords and the hearts had drawn-in cracks down the center.

“Much obliged,” I said, picking up my drink and the card, pocketing the latter. Tao and I worked our way around the edge of the crowd as I guided him towards a staircase that lead to an upper floor catwalk; one that came with its own cat.

I guess he hadn’t seen me with the crowd they had that night, otherwise he probably would have found me first. As it was, I managed to surprise him; not something that happens often, since he’s both the head of security at the club and has a keen sense of smell. He was leaning on the railing, looking over the crowd with a sketchbook in hand. Knowing him, I suspected he was looking over the wackier of the patrons to get ideas for new outfits; the guy was a self-taught tailor that had put together some impressive ensembles.

“Even off-duty you can’t stop watchin’ the crowd, eh?” I said as Tao and I approached.

“Hey Mike!” The guy said, giving me a broad smile as he turned our way. That smile was all teeth, but that wasn’t his fault; when you’re a smilodon, the better part of your mouth is teeth. The feline stood at least eight feet tall and was stuffed to the brim with muscle. Dark blue, but not quite navy blue, hair flowed back from his head, pulled back into a flyaway ponytail. His fur pattern was like a snow leopard’s; a light silvery-gray (bordering on white) with spots and a white undercoat. The smilodon must have gotten off shift just a while ago; he was still dressed in a black T-shirt that said “SECURITY” across his billboard pecs. A pair of wrap around Ray Bans was snugged between his chest muscles, hanging from his shirt collar by one leg. He was also decked out in spiky leather belts around his forearms, a spiked collar around his neck and a studded leather belt around his waist. His black jeans were what some might call “expertly frayed” at the ends of the legs. The smilodon was also one of the few anthros besides me I’d seen wear footgear. Most can make do with the natural pads on their footpaws; I can as well and occasionally do. However, both as a fashion accessory and for the added protection in our occupations, both the smilodon and I frequently wear boots; me with my combat boots I usually pick up at military surplus stores, him with his self-designed, heavily built waffle stompers.

“Been a while, man,” the smilodon said, meeting my outstretched hand and clapping me on the shoulder firmly enough to make me have to tense my leg to keep from getting staggered. “You been keeping busy?”

“Yeah, you know it,” I said. “How ‘bout you? Looks like you’ve been seeing a lot of folks come through the doors.”

“Yeah, we’ve been getting more n’ more popular,” The feline said, looking out over the crowd. “Most of ‘em the usual oddballs, desperate cases and the occasional hipster looking to ‘take a walk on the wild side.’”

“I hear ya,” I said. That’s when I remembered my manners and turned to the side. “Oh, sorry, forgot to introduce you guys. Tao, this is Bouncer Fukov, head of club security.”

“Pleasure,” the wolfipede said; he rose up a few extra segments of his lower body so the smilodon didn’t have to bend over to shake his hand.

“Likewise,” Bouncer rumbled. “Really impressive look you’ve got there; who did your work?”

“You mean my outfit?” Tao said, looking slightly perplexed. The smilodon chuckled.

“Nah, I mean the armor and the pincers,” Bouncer said.

“Ohhh,” the wolfipede said. “That’d be mom, dad and nature.”

“Ahhh naturally gifted, lucky you!” The smilodon said. Tao chuckled.

“Well depends on who you ask...,” he said. Bouncer grinned broadly and spread his arms out.

“Hey, look around you,” he said. “This place is built for unique people.” I smirked myself, taking a pull from my drink while watching as a goat with more than the usual number of arms walked by.

“We definitely need to do some catching up,” I said, “but first I need to see the dealer; I’m afraid it’s business that brought me here.”

“Uh oh,” Bouncer said, his grin slipping a bit. “You run into trouble?”

“Oh yeah,” I said ruefully. “And of a very unpleasant kind.”

“Ngh,” the smilodon grunted. “Let’s go see if Hunter’s free then.” Bouncer led the way towards a heavy looking security door at the far end of the catwalk. I slid the playing card I picked up at the bar into a card reader, opening the door to what was essentially a waiting room, but looked more like a private lounge. A variety of seats were scattered around, as well as a wide assortment of classic arcade game boxes and pinball machines. A ball pit occupied one side of the room, near a restroom with not just male and female symbols on the doors, but also a variety of drawn-in examples of various species. On the far side was another door with a hand-drawn broken heart symbol on it. A nearby cabinet held a variety of games, puzzles and cards, with a card table nearby for players to use.

As luck would have it, there was only one person occupying the room at the time. I recognized Rheo, Hunter’s personal assistant, stretched out on a couch and playing with a tablet. She was a shapely poison dart frog with yellow and purple skin, currently occupied with twirling a stylus between two fingers as she looked at the screen. She looked up as we came inside.

“Something up Bounce-oh hey Mike!” The amphibian said, lowering her tablet. “Haven’t seen you in a while; was worried you’d forgotten about us.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’d have to get hit in the head a few times before I could forget you folks,” I said. I once again made introductions with her and Tao before asking after Hunter.

“I’m pretty sure he’s in,” Rheo said, sliding off the couch. “It’s been surprisingly dead tonight; course the night before last was absolutely insane. Hunter said that’s the last time he does a ‘two for the price of one’ sale.”

“You know I was wondering something,” Tao said, running a finger along one of his pincers. “Why the secrecy? This stuff’s not illegal; well, not anymore.”

“No, but he’s not exactly...licensed...,” I said. “See, Hunter’s the guy’s first name.”

“Wait...,” Tao said, his eyes widening. “You’re not talking about Hunter RAMSEY, are you?! That guy’s supposed to be dead.”

“I was,” said a voice from the far door. “Then I got better.” Standing in the doorway was the man himself. Dr. Hunter Ramsey was wearing his perpetual look of late-night tiredness, bags under

his icy blue eyes and stubble on the chin of his pale-skinned face. The human had strawberry blonde hair that looked like the closest it ever got to a comb was when he ran his fingers through it. Hands in the pockets of his beat-up lab coat, the man looked less like one of the world's greatest geneticists and more like some drunk vagrant who pulled a lab coat out of a hospital dumpster.

"Evening doc," I said as Ramsey crossed the room towards us.

"Evening Mike," he said, "been a while."

"Heh, you're not the first to say that," I said with a smirk.

"And this would be...?" The doctor said, looking to the wolfipede.

"Tao," he said, looking rather startled. "Wow, so you're...wow, I never imagined I'd ever be meeting you."

"You flatter me," Ramesy said with the same slightly greasy grin that seemed to always plaster his face. "I take it you meet a lot of scientists?"

"A fair number," he said. "I guess I should have mentioned to you folks I work for the Global Medical Administration." Rheo and Bouncer looked somewhat surprised. I tried to hide the fact that I'd gotten a twinge of concern; I didn't think Tao's occupation would be that big an issue, because I'd expected he was someone who understood the need for occasional discretion. Now I was really banking on it.

"Huh, no kidding," Ramesy said, seemingly unfazed. "Well, I wish I could say all my papers are in order, but I tend to forget that particular detail."

"That's...understandable, given your background," the wolfipede said. "I mean, no offense, but..."

"None taken," the doctor said with a nonchalant shrug. "I know some of my previous antics dropped me in hot water with scientific and medical authorities. That's why I'm trying to make up for my mistakes."

"How so?" the wolfipede asked, head cocked to the side.

"Well," Ramesy said, rocking on his heels, "I offer discounted rates for treatments for disabilities and sickness; at-cost prices, whenever possible. Plus I don't demand medical insurance and assume all expenses for the required background checks for the patients."

"You do background checks?" Tao said, looking surprised. Ramsey chuckled.

"I may not have a clinic on Main St., but I still strive to meet the highest professional standards," he said.

“Hmmm...,” Tao mused. “Well, mind if I have a look around your facilities then?”

“You’re not gonna plant bugs or take pictures, are you?” Bouncer said, sounding rather serious.

“No no,” the wolfipede said, holding up his hands. “I just want to have a look for myself to see if things are as good as Dr. Ram...,”

“You can call me Hunter,” Ramesy said. “Or ‘The Dealer’, I go by either. But Dr. Ramesy is, for all intents and purposes, dead.”

“Ahh, right,” Tao said. The doctor (no matter what he said, I still thought of him as one) tossed his head and lead Tao, with me in tow this time, followed by Rheo and Bouncer, who were still looking concerned. I could understand why. People who aren’t in the scientific community probably wouldn’t know of Dr. Ramesy, but it’s not hard to find old news coverage of an illegal genetic experiment gone wrong that resulted in a three-story tree-man demolishing the side of a skyscraper. While no people were hurt (thank God) Dr. Ramesy was declared dead by both his former employers and the police.

Since that day, the doctor’s formerly sizeable ego had been effectively curbed when he realized the consequences of casually dismissing certain morals and ethics; he’d taken on himself the burden of trying to make amends for his past hubris and irresponsibility. The genetic creatures he’d birthed in his lab from his own DNA he’d taken under his wing like a surrogate family, and turned his efforts from pursuing scientific achievements just for the sake of doing them to instead providing private genetic altering services to fund his treatment of the sick and disabled.

And that, consequently, was why I hadn’t tried to take him in myself. I saw a man trying to atone for his sins, and as a sinner myself, I wasn’t about to try and stop him.

Ramesy gave Tao the dollar tour of his office and his lab. The wolfipede was a bit nonplussed about the state of the doctor’s office, which didn’t have a single piece of furniture that couldn’t be described as “beat to shit.” He was more impressed with the lab setup, however, finding everything meeting the required safety codes and medical standards for care. The whole setup was rough and not what you could call photogenic, but it was undoubtedly professional.

“So,” Ramesy said as we returned to his office, doing a little spin on his heel to face Tao again. “What do you think? Planning to call the police and have me lead off in handcuffs?”

Tao looked up at the ceiling; there was a very tense pause of about three seconds.

“Why would I do that?” he said. “I’m essentially a safety inspector and as far as I can tell here, your facilities make the grade.”

“And my lack of a license?” Ramesy said, cocking his head to one side. Tao smiled.

“That’s not my department,” he said. “Though I’d advise you to get one sometime, in case a patient ever reported you to a review board.”

Dr. Ramesy chuckled. “I’ll take that under advisement,” he said.

The doctor had a bit of work he needed to finish up before he could sit down with me, so in the meantime, Tao took up Rheo’s offer to check out the rest of the club. Once he was out of earshot, I let out sigh of relief I’d been holding back so as not to embarrass him.

“Glad that didn’t go worse,” I said.

“Mmhmm,” Bouncer rumbled, arms crossed as he watched the frog and wolfipede go down the stairs. We were both standing up on the catwalk again, back at one of the spots Bouncer frequents when he’s on indoor duty. “Good thing it didn’t or I would’ve had to pound you into the floor.”

“Hey,” I said, giving the cat a mildly injured look. “I understand you were worried, but give me a little credit. I knew he was with the GMA but I’ve gotten to know him well enough. He didn’t strike me as the rigid, never-bends-the-rules sort. I’m not gonna bring some stiff ass whistle-blower in here to put you guys on the run. Geeze, what do you take me for?”

“Among other things? A little reckless and too trusting for your own good,” Bouncer said with a smirk. I gave a rueful grunt and looked off to the side. Bouncer put a hand on my shoulder and gave me a mild shake; of course for him, mild meant any harder and he could’ve knocked me over.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” he said, “I wasn’t trying to call you dumb or anything. But sometimes you give people a little too much credit. Then you get pissed when they don’t meet your expectations.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” I said. “Though on the other hand, wouldn’t most folks find it flattering I think that highly of ‘em?” I smirked a bit and the smilodon chuckled lightly.

“Depends on if they see it as a compliment or a responsibility,” he said. The door to the waiting room opened as Hunter poked his head out.

“Sorry for the wait,” he said, “I just had to finish up a few patient files.”

“Not a problem,” I told the doctor as I followed him back inside. Returning to his office, I found my drink where I’d left it on Ramesy’s desk and took a seat in one of the two chairs opposite his own.

“So,” the doctor said, sitting down at his desk, putting his feet up on it and leaning back, fingers steepled, “What business brings you my way?”

“I needed to ask you about someone,” I said, taking a pull from my drink. “Tell me, does the name Oscar Quipple mean anything to you.”

I immediately knew things were as bad as I was afraid they were. That easygoing grin slid off Ramesy's face and practically hit the floor with an audible crash. He looked like I just told him Charles Manson had been reincarnated.

"Oscar...Quipple...", he said slowly, then closed his eyes and let out a slow breath. "Damn. There's a name I'd hoped I'd never have to hear again."

"He's bad as all that, eh?" I said, taking another sip.

"Dr. Quipple is...well...", Ramsey, looked up and clicked his tongue against his teeth, like he was searching for the right words. "...he's me from the path not taken."

"Your evil twin, eh?" I said, eyebrows raised. The doctor chuffed.

"Something like that," he said, sitting up straight and leaning forward on his desk. "Dr. Quipple was in the genetic field several years before me. I followed his research, very impressive stuff, at the time. However, even on my worst day before my ethical and moral enlightening, I didn't go as far as he did."

"How bad did he get?" I said. "I mean, no offense, but you broke that...shoot, what's it called...the Blue-Green Law?"

"Blue Green Concordat," Ramesy said. "But a rose by any other name. Yes, that was my biggest fuck-up. But bad at that was, this guy broke that and more."

"How much more?" I said apprehensively.

"When I broke the concordat," Ramesy said, "I did it by experimenting on myself. And I only did it once; that was enough for me to realize just how big a mistake it was. QUIPPLE? He mixed animal and plant genetic material multiple times, and he did it on unwilling test subjects."

"Damn," I said, draining the last of my screwdriver. Ramsey nodded.

"The authorities discovered Quipple's experiments and put out a warrant for him, but he managed to escape," the doctor said. "Quipple, unfortunately, also has the strength of personality. He's got natural charisma; his assistants and lab techs were fanatically devoted to him. In his hubris, he convinced them he was a scientific messiah that would bring them to the pinnacle of evolution, the perfect beings, physical immortality...you get the idea." I nodded; Quipple sounded like Herbert West, Victor Frankenstein and Josef Mengele rolled into one. The comparison only got more apt with what Ramesy said next.

"When they found his lab, most of his test subjects had to be put out of their misery," The doctor said. "He'd been maintaining them on life support systems to study their reactions to his genetic manipulation. He'd broken the Blue-Green Concordat, as well as several others, and in just about every instance the results were severe physical mutation, naturally, but also severe brain damage,

psychological breakdowns...and I can't even begin to imagine the emotional trauma. Dr. Quipple tortured those poor devils in the name of science and didn't have a shred of remorse for it."

"Sounds like that bastard needs a one-way ticket to Hell," I muttered. "Especially if he's still..." suddenly it clicked in my head. "Oh shit," I said. "That's why he's after the patients; he wants them for test subjects."

"Patients?" Ramesy said, sitting up straighter. I filled in the doctor on the missing cryo facility and the attack in Montpelier. When I was done, Ramesy nodded grimly.

"You're right, that fits," he said. "A bunch of people lost to society would be perfect for someone like Quipple; he could kidnap them for experimentation and not have to worry about anyone missing them."

"Well," I said, "not if me n' Tao get their first."

"You have any idea where they are?" Ramesy asked.

"We've got a lead to follow up on," I said. "We'll be heading out that way first thing tomorrow."

"Before you leave the club, check back with me," the doctor said. "There may be something else I can do to help."

"That would be appreciated," I said.

I swirled the ice around in my second screwdriver of the evening. After the grim information Dr. Ramsey had provided me, I wanted something to lighten my mood. Sitting at the bar, cracking a few jokes with the regular barflies and watching the people on the dance floor let their freak flags fly definitely helped. As I set my glass back down on the counter, I glanced up at an LCD board used to advertise club events; that night was "Fight Night" in about 10 minutes.

"You got many sign-ups for the match tonight?" I asked Tandor. The giraffe looked up at the sign.

"Not too many," he said. "Bouncer's kin's a disappointed, too. He only got four challengers 'is time; not much of a show t' put on fer defendin' his title as house champ."

I mused for a bit. A grin crept across my muzzle as a wicked urge started to creep into the back of my head.

"Is the sign-up sheet still open?" I asked.

"Yeah," the giraffe said, "It's over next to the ri..." he stopped then scrunched his face up.

“Aww hell,” he said. “What’re you up to?” I just gave him a hyena snicker with a tooth-filled grin as I hopped off the stool. Going past the dance floor stage into the room behind it, I found folding chairs, as well as several standing room areas for those who couldn’t fit in a regular seat, set up around a fighting ring like the kind used for professional wrestling. The seats were starting to fill up with an assortment of odd characters. I found the signup sheet on a clipboard, laying on a folding table next to the ring and scrawled my name on it. Some people would probably say I was suicidal to be planning to get in the ring with Bouncer. Had it been some kind of gladiator’s battle to the death, I’d say they were right; the guy had at least two feet on me in height, probably 200 pounds of pure beefcake on me, if not more so, and was an expert hand-to-hand fighter. Even just as a sparring match, I was clearly insane to think I could take him on in a straight up bout. But I’ve beaten people bigger than me by fighting smart, being tricky, and knowing where to hit them. The odds have never been in my favor, but I’ve pulled it off.

And for that match, I had a trick up my sleeve.

I moved to the contender’s pen near one side of the ring, taking off my trench coat and laying it over the fold out fencing as I hopped over it. The four other competitors looked at me quizzically as they saw me rolling up my sleeves to the elbows. In the pen with me were a minotaur with blood-red fur, a woolly mammoth with two trunks, a boa constrictor naga, and what I can only describe as a chimera, since the guy had a lion’s head, a dragon’s body (complete with wings) a bird of prey’s legs and a rattlesnake tail. All of them were built like tanks and about Bouncer’s height. The mammoth, in fact, was noticeably taller than the smilodon.

Those two being in a match is going to be all kinds of Paleolithic poetic-ness, I thought to myself.

“Fang, what’re you doin’?” The chimera said. He was a regular around the club, though I never learned his name.

“Doing something incredibly stupid,” I said with a grin. “Hey, could you loan me that wrapping tape?”

The chimera shook his head and tossed me the roll of white supportive bandage. I proceeded to wrap my hands and footpaws around the ankles for support, setting my boots aside, along with my tie and my personal items from my pockets. Even unburdened and loosened up thusly, I still stood out among the others in their fighter’s spandex and leotards.

“Psssh, man, your funeral,” the chimera said.

“LADIESSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS, GENTLEMEN, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN!” A thin lamia had slid into the center of the ring. Zork Retro was another familiar face to me among the WereHouse staff. Normally busy at his surveillance systems, the naga was apparently serving as MC for the match that night. Zork wore his hair in a frosted blonde Mohawk that topped his elongated head, a mixture of human and snake features making up his face. His human(ish) upper body had four arms and was sporting a red t-shirt advertising a heavy metal band I’d never heard of. His green snake lower body was coiled beneath him. Two hands on his hips, the lamia

had the third raised in the air as he called for everyone's attention, his fourth hand holding a remote mic.

“WELCOME TO TONIGHT'SSSSSSSSSSSSSSS MAIN EVENT!” Zork said.
“LET'SSSSSSSSSSSSS HEAR IT FOR OUR REIGNING CHAMPION,
BOUNCCCCCCCCCCCCER FUKOV!”

Bouncer came in from the far side of the ring, walking with a confident stride, his thick tail swishing lazily behind him. The smilodon had changed into a pair of blue, skin-tight spandex shorts with a yellow lightning design on the outside of either leg. He also wore matching knee and elbow pads and had bandaged his hands and paws much like myself. As he reached the ring, he showed off his feline agility by doing a somersaulting leap from the floor onto a turnbuckle, then a triple somersault to the center of the ring. As he landed, he spread his legs, clenched his fists, opened his arms wide as he threw back his head and let out a roar like a cougar that reached the rafters of the WereHouse.

The crowd ate. It. Up.

I'd moved to the back of the group because I wanted, as much as possible, to keep my late entry a surprise for him. First up to challenge the smilodon was the chimera. While the ring may have been designed for professional wrestling, the matches tended to be more like mixed martial arts. Bouncer took up a stance like he was about to perform a kata while the chimera started bouncing from one footpaw to the next, revealing his boxing training.

Doing a blow-by-blow of each of Bouncer's matches would take some time; suffice to say while the four guys before me gave it their best, Bouncer thumped each of them soundly. While the chimera's bobbing and weaving and fast punches landed a few blows to the feline, it wasn't enough to match the smilodon's combinations of palm thrusts and kicks then eventually put the chimera out of the ring for a 10 count. The mammoth tried to rely on brute strength and being a full three feet taller than Bouncer; but while he was able to handle a surprising number of blows, his slow, easily predicted swings never landed. Eventually, the smilodon managed to get behind him, jump from the turnbuckle and brought him down prone, then put him in a head scissor lock, adding his own spin to the move by grabbing one of the mammoth's legs and bending it backward until he submitted.

The naga was up next, and predictably tried to put a variety of holds and grapples to work against Bouncer. His style seemed very Greco-Roman, but Bouncer proved remarkably flexible for such a big guy; another advantage of his feline nature, I suspect. Eventually the naga got his coils around the cat, but before he could get high enough to pin Bouncer's arms, the smilodon brought his hands down in a hammer drop right onto the naga's head and put him down for a ten count.

Finally, the minotaur got in the ring. Surprisingly, he turned out to be a martial artist much like the smilodon. No bull rushing for him, he managed to land a solid blow or two as he and Bouncer faced off. However, seeing that the bovine wasn't going to react to him like he was waving a red cape, the smilodon changed tactics from a striking form of martial art to judo.

Several flips got the minotaur off balance, and Bouncer ended the match by LITERALLY taking the bull by the horns, pulling the minotaur backward over his shoulder and sending the bovine out of the ring.

Every ring out, every victory set the crowd off; Bouncer would end each match by back-flipping onto a turnbuckle, throwing his head back and doing another cougar-like roar, then throwing up the horns on both hands. But as the feline stepped down from his latest victory pose, I grinned; it was my turn.

“AND NOW FOR OUR FINAL CHALLENGER!” Zork said, gliding into the center of the ring as Bouncer crossed his arms, looking around. “WEIGHTING IN AT 190 POUNDS, MIKE FANG!” Bouncer did a double take as he saw me grab the edge of the ring and roll under the low chord. The crowd gave me polite applause, but I could see more than a few people turning to whisper as they looked at me like I was nuts. I’m pretty sure I saw at least a couple of them mutter something about me being a “jobber”.

As was customary before each of his matches, Bouncer met me in the center of the ring for a handshake. “Mike, d’you know what you’re doing?” he said, glancing around. “I really don’t want to hurt you...”

“Heh, don’t pull your punches on my account,” I said. “I’m not going to go easy on YOU.”

“Well, alright...,” the smilodon said. Losing his title was clearly the last thing on his mind; I could see him trying to figure out how to make it a good show without either completely humiliating me or putting me in the hospital. He shouldn’t have worried.

The two of us went to our corners. I grinned as I approached mine. I’d specifically chosen my corner because it had a particular feature. The ring was equipped with a water spigot nearby with a hose attached, used by the towel boys to wash down the mat between matches. I grabbed the hose and, as the match bell clanged, turned around and clamped my jaws down on the hose. If three letters could describe Bouncer’s expression as he took one step towards me, then came to a halt, those letters would be W, T and F.

The crowd start making noise, some of it laughing, some of it confusion, and a smattering of applause, as I twisted the hose nozzle. Water filled my muzzle quickly, bulging out my cheeks as I guzzled from the tube. Bouncer put his hands on his hips, a look of bemusement on his face, as my own disappeared from his view behind a fast-swelling ball gut coming off of my torso. The crowd started to laugh a bit louder as my gut stretched my shirt further and further, a special treatment of the fabric giving it remarkable elasticity. But even with that stretchy-ness, it wasn’t enough to hold back my gut entirely, as big gaps started appearing between the stretched-out buttons.

Bouncer turned to the audience and gave them a look that said “are you seein’ this shit?” They just laughed even louder as a result, or maybe it was the fact I now looked like I’d swallowed an aquarium...and then some. I had to start spreading my legs a bit further apart to keep balanced, and I could feel the slack come out of my sleeves and pant legs as well, my limbs starting to

thicken up. Biology is funny, though; for some people, pumping themselves up like I was would turn them into a sphere, others would stay really proportionate. Me? I get a ball gut like nobody's business while also getting proportionately stronger, maintaining my ability to move instead of being pinned to the spot by my own bulk.

My girth was getting close to the size of a piece of furniture, gaps between my strained buttons you could fit a small throw rug in, exposing large sections of my tan belly. I could have hidden a bedroom dresser behind my gut by the time I shut the hose off and spit it out.

“BARRRRRRRRRRRP!” I let out a wet belch to the sound of the crowd's amusement. I laced my fingers together and stretched my arms out, rolled my head around on my shoulders, and gave Bouncer a tooth-filled smile.

Go time. I thought to myself, and gave the smilodon a “come at me bro” gesture. The feline shrugged, walked up to me and took a lazy swipe with one hand. But with my gut in the way, all I had to do was lean my shoulders back slightly and that hand passed an inch away from my nose. Bouncer cocked an eyebrow. He took another swipe; second verse same as the first. I grinned at him even wider. The smilodon's pursed lips and raised eyebrows all said “Oh you think you're clever, do you?” without him having to actually say a word. The feline started to move and I was sure I knew what was coming; he was going to shove himself forward to get my upper body within arm's reach. But like I said, when I bloat, I keep my balance and mobility. Not only that, but I gain plenty of weight to throw around.

I tensed my legs as Bouncer approached, anticipating that next punch. Sure enough, I saw his left hand coming for the side of my head; I spun on my heel, sweeping my oversized gut around like a kid playing with a beanbag chair, coming around full circle. My gut made a sloshing GLOONK! sound as it connected with the smilodon's back, sending him stumbling forward in surprise as he plowed into the turnbuckle behind me. I was on a roll, and wasn't about to stop there. Bouncer had just enough time to turn around and bug his eyes out as I took about three bounding steps forward and launched myself belly-first at him.

“GWORRRF!” the smilodon blurted out as my gut acted like a miniature wrecking ball made out of Jell-O, slamming into him and compressing slightly as he was pinned in the corner. The crowd was howling with laughter as the feline slapped at my gut in an attempt to free himself after getting thoroughly rocked. I just chuckled in my throat at the sensations of someone thumping at my bloated-out gut.

It took a few more seconds, but Bouncer was too strong to let a little thing like a water-bloated hyena keep him down for long. The feline narrowed his eyes at me as I grinned at him; he grinned back at me, grabbed the ropes behind him, squatted a bit, then made a motion like a swimmer doing a backstroke, shooting up into the air from between me and the turnbuckle. He did a graceful backflip, then landed in a crouch on the turnbuckle, the crowd applauding as he then pounced on me and took me down by the shoulders to the mat.

I was surprised by Bouncer's sudden recovery, and went down hard to the floor of the ring. A cough escaped me before I recognized the sound of a hand slapping canvas.

"ONE!" I heard Zork saying. "TWO!" Bouncer was lying across me, but big as he was, he still managed to have his hands on my shoulders (though I'm pretty sure his footpaws couldn't have been touching the canvas). As quick as I could, I put my footpaws flat on the mat and brought my knees up. My gut bucked forward, sending Bouncer tumbling over to land flat on his back. I went with the momentum and rolled my bloated self into a sitting position on him, my butt on his lap, and my gut on top of his torso.

"RRRRF!" The feline grunted. I just crossed my arms and let out a loud hyena cackle, the crowd whistling and cheering. I turned and looked behind me to give everyone a toothy smile. As I did, I couldn't help but notice Bouncer's tail was swishing and curling all around.

Well that's good, I thought to myself. I wouldn't want him to not enjoy this.

Zork started slapping canvas again, but this time only managed to get in a one-count. I felt two powerful hands slap 'yena belly, and suddenly my gut loomed larger in my own view. Bouncer rolled me off himself, putting me on my back again. This time, however, he didn't have the energy to try and climb on top of me again, and instead just sat up on his elbows, panting a bit. For my part, I was starting to get dizzy from all this turning over and over, and pushed myself onto my elbows as well.

"Well," I heard Bouncer pant, but couldn't see him from behind my bloated girth. "Nice lil' strategy you got there. Looks like I'm going to have to...take a page out of your book."

What? I thought. I rocked back and forth a couple times before finally rolling into a squatting position, then pulled myself upright. By then, Bouncer had gotten to the other corner and grabbed the hose I'd used before. I could have bull-rushed him again to stop him...but that would have required me to WANT to stop him. Instead, I just grinned, crossed my arms and rested them on top of my engorged gut as I watched the show. By this point the crowd was into the spirit of things; as Bouncer clamped his jaws down on the hose and twisted the nozzle on, people were on their footpaws (if they had any), chanting "GO! GO! GO!" like frat boys at a kegger. The smilodon's abs started bulging outward, his stretching girth also stretching his muscles, gradually smoothing them out to bare outlines across a furry white water balloon.

I cocked an eyebrow and snickered some more as the floor show went on. Bouncer was practically sucking on the hose like a baby on its mother's...well you get the idea. That bulge stretched towards me, towards the crowd on either side, towards the ceiling and the floor. The smilodon repositioned his footpaws to avoid falling over, his girth bloating and bulging, sloshing audibly as his upper body and legs started disappearing behind it. I tried playing it cool, examining my nails, but I was watching Bouncer from the side; the irrepressible smile on my face was proof enough of that.

By the time the feline twisted the hose off and tossed it aside with a loud BARRRRRRRRRP! his gut was just as big as my own. We looked like furniture movers who did their jobs by swallowing armchairs. The smilodon grinned at me, laced his fingers together and extended his arms, palms forward,

"Let's see if you take it as well as you dish it," he said, and with surprising speed, he jumped to right in front of me! Bent at the knees, Bouncer clenched his fists, straightened his legs and shoved his belly into mine; the two met with a fluid GLORK! sending me staggering backward. I found myself up against the ropes, wondering if they were about to break under my engorged mass. But thankfully they were holding up. I rebounded to right in front of Bouncer and returned the favor; the smilodon took about two steps backward from the gut-slam, and then stood his ground.

"B'rheh," he burped out with a smirk. He started to come towards me as I braced for another shove. But at the last second, the smilodon pivoted and brought his leg around in a sweeping roundhouse that caught my gut right in the side.

"BRAURRRRRRRRP!" a massive belch escaped my muzzle. The sensation of the smilodon's footpaw colliding with my girth was intense...but not unpleasant.

"Better out than in, eh?" Bouncer said. I cocked an eyebrow.

"You tell ME!" I responded, and swung to the side, looping an uppercut into the smilodon's belly.

BRAORRRRRUPPP!" rattled out of his muzzle. But again, he just grinned at me in the aftermath.

"Oooo, thought that'd never come out," he said. The two of us backed up a step and began circling around the ring, doing a sideways walk like a couple of stray dogs circling a bone. I had an idea in mind, but first I had to get the smilodon to come to me. It wasn't hard, really; as soon as I had Bouncer where I wanted him, I took several running steps forward. The smilodon was all too ready meet me, and as I pivoted on my heel, he went right past me, like a bull past a matador, and my gut was the red cape.

I'd put Bouncer so his back was to a turnbuckle; now I ran to that corner, spun around and climbed backward up onto it. As the smilodon brought himself to a halt, a surprising feat given what inertia must have been doing with him, the crowd was on its feet again in anticipation. I gauged the distance, clenching my fists and squatting. Bouncer turned and looked up just as I launched myself off the top rope, blotting out the light over him like some cartoon boulder about to squash Wile E. Coyote!

I tensed for the impact as I felt gravity kicking in, coming down, down...suddenly, I stopped! I wobbled a bit on top of my gut, flailing my arms and legs. I had to crane my neck to look around, but it was that throaty chuckle from Bouncer that told me what happened; the feline had CAUGHT ME.

"Nice...try..." I heard him grunt out, sounding rather winded. "But...no...cigar!" WHOMP! The smilodon body slammed me to the mat, causing me to bounce and roll into a sitting position back into the corner I'd jumped from. The world spun as I tried to shake off the dizziness and get back up. Bouncer was panting hard; I guess my meteor-like drop onto him hadn't been a complete

waste after all. But I was getting worn out as well; I needed to end it before the smilodon's greater reserve of strength won out.

Bouncer and I reoriented ourselves with one another, eyes narrowed. Backs to the sides of the ring, I took two steps back, grabbing the top rope with both hands from behind. Bouncer saw this, but rather than just imitate me, the smilodon gave me a tooth-filled grimace, put his hands on his thighs, and did the traditional sumo wrestler squat and footpaw stomp. The ropes tensed behind me as I shoved my bulk back up against them. Bouncer's tail was going crazy just behind him as his muscles quivered, standing out in relief. Then, we launched ourselves at each other, flying across the ring like a pair of out-of-control, furry pinballs, meeting in the center with a resounding WHOP! as our bellies slammed into one another hard enough to create a small shock wave! The impact sent a wave of intense sensation through my gut that went through the rest of me as well. From the smilodon's expression I gathered he felt it too. I was certainly close enough to his face to tell; our collision had distended both our bellies out to the sides so that we were nose to nose, grinning at one another as our muscles strained to push against each other.

Bouncer and I held that pose for about two seconds. Then, we felt ourselves starting to slide backward. We both blinked, and looked down at our quivering guts. Our footpaws started to slide backward as the resilience and elasticity of our bellies began to show itself.

"Uh oh," we both said. BWOOMP! Our bellies expanded back outward, sending both of us flying in reverse. Going ass over teakettle, I went through the ropes as the world spun around me like I was in a clothes dryer. Judging by the sound from the other side of the ring, Bouncer had also tumbled out. Zork, shaking a look of amazement off his face, slid back into the ring. "ONE! TWO! THREE! FOUR!..."

The world, for me, refused to cooperate and hold still. I was on my back and trying to get some kind of purchase to pull myself up. That's when I remembered up was toward the CEILING, and began rocking to get up into a sitting position.

"SSSSSSSSIX! SSSSSSSSSSEVEN!" I was thankful at that moment for Zork's snake speech impediment; it gave me a little extra time as I got an arm on the edge of the ring and got onto my footpaws. I looked across the mat; Bouncer's hand suddenly shot up like a zombie's out of a grave in a horror movie, grabbing the lower rope. "HRRRRRNGH!" I heard him grunt, and his other hand grabbed the top rope! Pulling, the smilodon came up over the edge. The world was still playing topsy-turvy games with me, but I caught a good look at Bouncer's triumphant looking face as he gripped the top rope with both hands to prepare to vault back into the ring.

"EIGHT!" Zork said. At that moment, the smilodon started to push himself upward, when suddenly he blinked; it looked like he pushed himself too fast and gave himself a sudden case of vertigo.

"Wugh," I heard him grunt, then tumble backward and land on his back outside the ring again!

"NINE!" Zork shouted. Letting out a triumphant hyena cackle, I looked up and reached for the top rope to pull myself up and claim victory.

I missed. The rope, spinning around in my vision, danced just out of reach. I shifted my weight without anything to hold myself up, and soon, WHOMP! I was flat on my back again.

"TEN!" Zork shouted. "IT'SSSSSSS A DRAW!"

The crowd went completely WILD. Popcorn bags, drink cans, hats, and most likely the roof went flying into the air as the cheering became almost deafening. The world finally decided to play nice with me now that the match was over. Strong hands from some of the rest of the crowd helped me back up, slapping me on the back and shoulders as I blinked and steadied myself. Others were doing the same for Bouncer, who shook his head and let out a loud snort through his nose as his vertigo wore off.

Taking our time, letting my balance come back to me, I sloshed and gurgled as I made my way around the ringside, shaking hands, doing high-fives, the smilodon getting even more attention than myself. Then again, this was his home field and he was the hometown favorite. We met in the middle on one side of the ring, smiling at each other and shaking hands.

"Good match," Bouncer said.

"Likewise," I replied.

"Are you guys gonna have a rematch?!" someone in the crowd said. Bouncer and I looked at each other, then at the eager fan.

"Another time," we said together.

The buzzing noise slowly nagged me awake. I clenched my eyes, then popped them open as I looked around. Lying on the coffee table next to the sofa, my smart phone's built-in alarm clock was chiming at me. I pushed myself up off the couch where I'd been sleeping and poked the screen with a finger to get the little electronic pest to shut up. Sitting up properly, I looked around the room. I was in Dr. Ramsey's waiting room, the remains of a party strewn around; empty drink cans, pizza boxes, plastic cups and the like.

The door to the club proper slid open and Tao clattered in. "Well good morning," he said. "I figured you'd be waking up now."

"Mmmph, mornin'," I said, stretching and yawning.

"Heh, you guys put on quite a show last night," the wolfipede said, "both in the ring and out of it." I chuckled, scratching my back-to-normal stomach. Once the match had been over, Bouncer and I had been mobbed by the spectators for photo ops. We'd spent a good while doing flex poses, comedic poses, poses with others next to us and between us...I'm not too proud to admit I took a few selfies with Bouncer, one of the best ones being the two of us with our arms around

each other's shoulders. After that, we'd attracted more attention from the dance crowd as we'd left the ring area of the club, and couldn't get away without quite a few more photo requests. I don't know how they managed it, but the crowd somehow convinced me to get out on the dance floor. It may sound funny, but despite having just competed in a spectator fight match, I'm actually kind of nervous in big social situations. I guess part of it was I was too loosened up from everything at that point to care too much, but the fact Bouncer and Tao were shaking it out there with me helped too; having people you feel you can trust and aren't going to make fun of you helps in situations like that.

After tossing our weight around in the mosh pit, we went upstairs for a more private party with the club VIPs and staff. After a long night, I squeezed myself into the restroom to get rid of my "water weight". I'd done my usual relaxation of my throat muscles to burp up a fair amount of it, but a surprising amount had already been...processed by my system. Frankly by the end I was surprised my bladder hadn't come out with the rest.

"That was one hell of a match you guys had," Tao said. "Makes me wonder why you don't fight like that all the time."

"You mean pumped up?" I said, pocketing my phone. "Well, for starters I don't usually mix business with pleasure, heh. The other reason is in a REAL fight, where people are actually trying to hurt me, it's got more cons than pros."

"Really?" Tao said. I nodded.

"Yeah, see, bloated out, a blunt hit to the gut for me isn't painful...heh, it's actually pretty fun, but a hit anywhere else still hurts, so the added weight can be a hindrance and my gut can get in the way of dodging if the enemy's too fast. Plus a sharp blow, like a stab or a gunshot, is still gonna hurt, and me with a bloated out gut makes a really good target."

"Make's sense," the wolfipede said. "So, I take it you got what you needed from the doc, I mean, the dealer last night?" I nodded.

"Yep," I replied and filled the wolfipede in. He shuddered.

"The fact this guy wasn't already on my organization's radar is scary," he said. "How'd he manage to fall off it?"

"No idea," I said. "Though if he's as charismatic as all that, he might've had people in your organization deleting records of him just like he did with his own employers."

"Well, the sooner we keep the patients out of his hands, the better," the wolfipede said. "When's our train?"

"At 12:30," I said, checking my watch. "We've got three hours, so after I've showered and changed clothes, we'll get going."

"One step ahead of you," Bouncer said from the doorway. I looked to the side. The smilodon, also back down to regular size, was dressed in a blue denim jacket with a burgundy sweatshirt hood. The hood was down, a ball cap on the feline's head, his ponytail coming through the back hole where the headband strap was. He wore a black tank top under the jacket and a pair of blue jeans, along with a pair of tan work boots. With a large duffel bag hanging from one shoulder, he looked like a dock worker just coming off shift.

"You're..." I started, but Dr. Ramesy, stepping out from behind Bouncer, finished for me.

"...coming with you," he said. "I told Bouncer everything you told me last night, and he agreed."

"Heh, agreed?" the smilodon said. "Hell Ramesy, you couldn't keep me here if you tried."

"Aheh, don't flatter yourself, big guy," the doctor said. I personally wouldn't have put money on either of them if it came down to that. Bouncer's a powerful guy, but the doctor had a ton of tricks up his sleeve; I was sure I hadn't learned about all of them, either.

"Well, I would certainly appreciate having someone else on our side," I said.

"Here here," Tao chimed in.

"...but you do realize the risk, right?" I said, "I mean I don't want you to put your neck in the hangman's noose on account of..."

"Don't sweat it Mike," Bouncer said. "I know you'd do the same for me or the rest of the crew here. Besides, Quipple's a maniac with a god complex and, from the sound of it, a platoon of acolytes ready to kill on his behalf."

"You think he's got that many?" I said, looking from Bouncer to Ramsey.

"When he was a legit scientist, Quipple's lab had a staff of at least 20," the doctor said. "And if he's had time to go around finding desperate souls that would believe his sales pitch..."

I nodded. "Like you said last night, it fits."

"Right," Bouncer said. "That's something the world really doesn't need."

"Well," I said, going up and clapping the smilodon on the shoulder. "Glad to have you aboard."

Whenever people talk about nature, they often talk about how fickle it is. Nowhere is this more obvious than when people talk about either the sea or the weather. And I certainly couldn't deny it as we stepped off the train at Wichita Station. About five days ago Tao and I had been shivering from the cold of Vermont, while here in the west, I had to forego my usual fedora and take the winter lining out of my trench coat to wear it. Spring had broken through like a kid

doing a cannonball off a diving board. While a good, strong wind was blowing, making it comfortable to have a jacket of some kind on, the bright sunshine made it preferable to go without cold weather bundling.

The trip had been a good one; Bouncer and I got caught up with each other while he and Tao got acquainted. The feline had been making headway with his plans to come out with his own clothing line for the physically gifted; he'd even made some guarded inquiries to a small clothing manufacturer and send them a few of his concept drawings. They'd responded by saying they'd be interested in seeing some prototypes.

For Bouncer the only catch was making sure they weren't going to balk at doing business with someone like him. Those lab creations of Dr. Ramesy's I'd mentioned before? Bouncer was one of them, and being an eight-foot powerhouse decked out with unlicensed, military-grade genetic enhancements meant he could get in serious trouble if the authorities decided to look close enough. The police had developed a test to determine if someone was illegally modified, but a lot like giving someone a Voigt-Kampff test in Blade Runner, checking someone out for illegal mods was easier said than done, since most who -were- modded illegally would balk at the test; and by "balk" I mean "start launching furniture or grow spike-covered tentacles and lash out at you." Personally my stance was illegal modding was one of those things I didn't get concerned about until a person used those mods to do something worse; like what Quipple's people were doing.

The station was bustling with folks, many of them decked out in a variety of plaids and denims. Cowboy hats were more prevalent here than elsewhere, though there were plenty of ball caps and bare-headed folks to go around too. I leaned against the car rental counter as Tao arranged for our transportation; Bouncer and I both swept the station's sitting area with our eyes, ready for trouble this time. Nobody stood out, but I figured that just meant Quipple's people had gotten wise to our alertness and were hiding their presence better.

Another full-sized van was waiting for us in the rental parking lot. Tao curled himself up in the back while Bouncer sprawled out in the back seat, leaving me to take the wheel. The van was pretty old, smelling of tobacco smoke and fresh hay, but outside of a few scuffs on the inside from boots and shoes kicking up against the doors, it was in good enough condition. I was adjusting the rearview mirror as we were leaving the station parking lot when I saw a car pull up behind us. I looked close in the mirror.

"Hey, Tao," I said. "You're closer; how many people are in that car behind us?"

The wolfipede sat up straighter. He feigned stretching as he threw a sideways glance out the back window.

"Five," he said. "Driver, passenger, three in back."

"Damn," I said through gritted teeth. Bouncer sat up straighter.

"You think it's a tail?" He asked.

"A car packed to capacity with passengers?" I said. "I'd say it's unusual."

"Could just be a carpool," the smilodon said, looking to the rearview mirror himself.

"True....," I said. "Let's test that theory in a few minutes..."

We were on our way to MalaDex headquarters, the other company that had been in contact with the missing cryo facility. But seeing as how it looked like we'd picked up a tail, I decided to take a small detour. Flat farmlands rolled by on either side of us, cattle lazily grazing and occasionally looking up at the traffic cruising by them on the other side of their wire fences. I kept an eye on the car behind us; it had taken the same turn we had and was keeping pace with us down the highway. That didn't do anything for my nerves.

Finally, I spotted what I was looking for; a rest stop. I took my footpaw off the accelerator and turned onto the off-ramp leading to a small, brick, visitor center-style brick building surrounded by an immaculately trimmed lawn. Sapling trees were planted around it, adding a bit of color among the picnic benches. I pulled into a parking space and watched. Sure enough, the car behind us had pulled in as well and was finding a parking spot just a few spaces down and across the traffic lane from us.

"I hate it when I'm right," I muttered.

"So what's the plan?" Bouncer said, cracking his knuckles.

"We can't just walk up to them and belt them," Tao said. I nodded.

"Right, so we gotta get them to tip their hand first," I said. "I'll see if I can pressure one of them into doing something stupid. When that happens, be ready. Oh, and let's try to do this when there aren't many people around; don't want a bunch of passersby's getting caught up in this."

I stepped out of the van, stretching my arms and legs as I headed towards the visitor center building. It had an open air hallway with a small room off to the left with a state map on the wall, along with racks of travel brochures for various sights and attractions. To the right was an alcove with vending machines flanked by the restroom doors. I stepped into the map room and pretended to be browsing among the brochures. Off to the side, I saw Bouncer go up to the vending machines and start rummaging through his pockets. Tao slid into the men's room.

We hadn't been there more than ten seconds when we each had a shadow. For me it was a fox about a head taller than me with a brown crew cut, ostensibly looking at the brochures himself. A short, but stout-looking raccoon walked up to the water fountain just past the vending machines and took an inordinately long drink before he leaned up against the wall, watching Bouncer go through his pocket change. A gryphon with navy blue feathers and a black beak stepped into the restroom. As tailing goes, they were about as skilled at it as Democrat politician trying to lower taxes.

Time to be annoying, I thought, and went right up to the fox.

"Hey, bud," I said, holding up a brochure. "You know how I can get to the Wichita Country Music Hall? I just got into town and I can't get my GPS to work around here..."

"Sorry, can't help ya," the fox said, giving me a sideways glance and then pointedly trying to not make eye contact.

"Ahh, another tourist, eh?" I said. "Yeah, me n' my friends are actually in town on a business trip, but we're gonna be here a few days, so we figure we'll see some of the sights while we're in town..."

"Mmmhmm..." the fox said, plainly not interested in small talk with the guy he was supposed to be following.

"Yeah, I figure we can go see the music hall...then maybe the Great Westward Expansion History Museum," I said, pulling up another brochure, "Oh and I don't want to miss the Kansas State Rodeo, that's for sure! What're you gonna be seein'?"

"Haven't decided...", the fox said, sounding like he was getting seriously peeved.

"I feel ya," I said, trying to sound like an over-eager sightseer, the kind you'd hate to have to sit next to on the tour bus because they won't shut the hell up and let you enjoy yourself. "You know I'm really hopin' this business gets wrapped up quick, so we can get in on some of the tours here. I don't get to come out west very often, I'm stuck back east myself. Where are you from, by the by?"

"Around," the fox said, sounding like he was a half-step from losing it.

"Ahhh, a wanderer, eh?" I said, making my eyes really big. "Man, I've thought about livin' like that myself, getting out on the open road, goin' wherever my fancy takes me, just ridin' along without a care in the world, seeing everything there is to come across out on th-"

That's as far as I got. Apparently whatever Dr. Quipple did to his minions, he didn't imbue many of them with patience. The fox suddenly grabbed me by the coat and shoved me up against the rack. I suddenly found my head forked between a pair of hard, sharp-looking boney spikes that emerged from the back of the fox's hands like a certain comic book character I could name.

"That's IT," the fox snarled. "I'm not following you on a tour of every fucking tourist trap in this state." I steeled myself for the fight about to happen. Just outside, I could hear a car pull up; it was one of those people you get behind in traffic sometimes, the ones that crank up their bass until it's rattling the windows. The current song was just coming to an end as the fox twisted my head to the side by turning his hand, using the claws to push on my skull.

"You tell me where the next..."

That's as far as HE got, before he suddenly found his head snagged in Bouncer's hand. From the

bass-thumping car outside suddenly came the sound of "Smack My Bitch Up." How appropriate.

The smilodon slammed the fox face-first into the brochure rack, forcing him to let me go. Suddenly, an electric ticking noise came from behind him as the feline suddenly went rigid, his fur standing up on end. Bouncer staggered to the side, revealing the raccoon standing behind him; the procyon had some kind of organ emerging from the palms of his hands, a dull gray surface that was crackling with electricity. I drew a sudden mental image of a trip to an aquarium I made once, where the handlers showed the guests how an electric eel hunts.

I wasted no time in stepping forward and driving the heel of my boot into the raccoon's chest, sending him backward. Without any warning, the door to the bathroom burst open. Tao was coiled around the gryphon and had him in a headlock. The bird-feline reached up and pulled the wolfpede around to his front, opened his beak, then let out an ear-splitting screech that caused the glass of the vending machine they were standing in front of to shatter. Tao, who'd switched his grip so his hands were around the gryphon's throat, clapped his hands to his ears, face contorted in pain; his nose started to bleed, but I seriously doubted he was either turned on or doing his Andrew W.K. impression. The wolfpede gritted his teeth, then slammed his forehead into his attacker's. The gryphon snapped his head back, beak clapping shut to cut off his ungodly shrieking.

Meanwhile I was still squaring off with the 'coon. The procyon was built like a dwarf; short, but stocky and thick with muscle. He was on his footpaws again in seconds, coming at me to take swiping jabs at me with his palms open. I could feel the air crackle as I pulled back from his attacks, returning a couple shots of my own. I missed his head with one, but managed to land a blow to his shoulder that knocked him off balance, opening him up for an elbow to the forehead. I had to lean in to deliver it, which is what saved me from getting my head skewered; I felt the tip of the fox's boney claws rake the back of my neck, putting a gash on it that got my attention.

I spun around to face my second attacker. The vulpine was snarling and already had his other hand coming forward in a straight punch that would have driven those bone spikes of his into my chest. But a thick feline leg suddenly snapped forward in a sweeping kick that doubled the fox over. Bouncer had recovered from getting enough volts through him to light up the Time Square New Year's ball and made the save; an elbow to the back of the head and the vulpine went down hard.

Tao was still grappling with the gryphon in the meantime. The wolfpede had his hands around the lion-bird's throat to stop him from trying to blast out his ear drums again, so the gryphon was instead slamming up against the wall to try and force Tao to uncoil. It took three tries but the third time smacked the back of Tao's head against the tiled wall, dazing him enough for the gryphon to yank the wolfpede from around him and shove him away. Tao shook his head as the gryphon started to rev up another shriek. The wolfpede swept his lower body out in a leg sweep, sending the lion-bird down on his back. That sonic blast came out as he hit the ground; it was LOUD, even louder than before. In fact, it was so loud that when it hit the ceiling a section of plaster and tile the size of card table came down onto his head and shoulders with an unpleasant CRACK.

While all this was going on, I had a heavy weight grab me from behind. The raccoon had gotten over the smack to the forehead I gave him, and leapt on my back. My hands went up to grab his around the wrists as I went lurching backward, trying to keep those crackling palms from coming together on my temples and giving me a fatal dose of electroshock therapy. Bouncer turned to try and help me, but the fox was back on his footpaws again and kicked the smilodon in the back of the leg, staggering him. I went reeling through the bathroom door, but I had just enough time to see the fox hauling back both hands to plunge them into Bouncer's neck. With a snarl, the smilodon turned and delivered a palm heel thrust at full force to the fox's face. The vulpine's head whipped to the side violently, an unpleasant CRACK accompanying it as he collapsed in a limp heap.

I rebounded off the walls in the bathroom, the raccoon's electrified palms coming closer and closer to my head. My hair started to tingle as my strength was giving out. Mustering everything I had left, I pushed myself forward towards one of the stalls, slamming through the door. I dropped to my knees and pulled, shoving the raccoon's hands into the toilet bowl. Loud electric crackling came from the bowl in front of me, making me turn my face up and away. I felt the raccoon go stiff as a board on my back, muscles twitching as he let out a croaking, gargling death rattle and dropped off my back. I gasped for breath as I looked behind me. Smoke was rising up off the procyon's hands, his limbs sticking up in the air and curled like a dead insect.

I pulled myself to my footpaws and went to go check on the others; the overly-loud techno beat still thumping, apparently providing a good cover for the brawl. Tao was wiping blood from his nose on the back of his hand while Bouncer winced as he felt a sore spot on his back; probably where the raccoon zapped him. I leaned against the doorframe of the bathroom and started to say something, when someone came around the corner.

"Wonder what's taking..." one of the two said. A frilled lizard stepped around the side of the visitor center's wall, followed by a panther of a similar size and build as Bouncer. They stopped dead in their tracks as they saw us and the scene; we all stood frozen for about five seconds.

For a moment, I hoped they were just a couple of guys who stopped to take a leak.

"Hey, could you call the..." I started to say. Then, saw the angry looks darkening the pair's faces.

"Shiiiiit," I said through my teeth and went for my revolver. The lizard's frill went up, and suddenly a cloud of rank-smelling black gas spewed out from its edges. As I lost sight of the two, I saw the lizard start to reach into his coat.

"GUN!" I yelled, drawing my own piece and going into a crouch. A fairly loud report came out of the smoke-like cloud at the end of the hall, a bullet pocking into the door just above and to the left of my head. I fired my own gun, the hall acting like an echo chamber for the magnum report. I couldn't tell if I'd hit anything; suddenly the panther came rushing out of the cloud like a feral dragon charging out of its cave to meet a challenger, claws extended, hands held up, ready to grab the first person he could get them on. Bouncer met him head on with his own claws bared, the two locking hands as they went pushing and shoving each other into the brochure room.

When the gunshot went off, Tao dropped flat to the ground and started doing a back and forth rocking motion. Arms held out, eyes narrow, his arthropod parts twitched with razor-sharp alertness. Another shot rang out, but the wolfipede jerked himself to the right just in time for the bullet to crack off the floor where his torso had been.

The smoke-like gas started to disperse; I thumbed back the hammer and raised my revolver up, ready to take another shot. The last one had been a bit hasty, and I was worried about hitting a bystander. Still, I'd used the lizard's muzzle flash to aim at before, but it was still a dicey situation.

The lizard wasn't there. Cussing under my breath, I stood up and advanced towards the corner. Looking both ways, I did a fast peek around the side and just caught sight of the lizard crouched behind a parked car. He fired again, but not before I ducked back, brick dust flying up from another shot avoided.

Tao moved to try and help Bouncer, meanwhile. The smilodon had shoved his opponent back and broken off the hand lock, but the panther was proving to be a hard opponent. As Bouncer took a swing, the black feline ducked it and responded with an uppercut to the smilodon's ribcage, then another one to his chin. Tao went for a leg sweep, but the panther jumped it.

I tensed my leg muscles and tried to focus on my own opponent. I'd seen another car parked not far from the entrance to the visitor center. Steeling myself, I made a bolted to the car, another shot going just past me as I came down into a crouch. The lizard tried to get a bead on me, but I'd already had my sights on him. My magnum bucked in my hands a split second before the lizard's head snapped back, along with an unpleasant splatter of blood from behind it, and he dropped.

Biting back on that unpleasant feeling I get when my work gets grim, I ran back to the center. I got there just in time to see Bouncer, sporting a black eye and a set of scratches across his face, landed an elbow to the panther's chest, but receive a snap kick to the side of his head for his trouble. Tao was weaving around behind the two, and tried to coil himself around the panther. But the dark feline had unnatural reflexes; with only a sideways glance, he did a sideways chop and cracked Tao right in the forehead, sending him sprawling to the floor, clutching his head.

"GIVE IT UP!" I yelled at the panther, raising my gun up. But I was too close to him. Bouncer held off to see what his opponent would do, and the panther suddenly squatted, launched himself at me like a striking cobra, and slammed both fists into my torso before I could lower my aim. I was hurled back across the hallway, the wind knocked out of me as I hit the wall and slid to the floor.

Bouncer did a snap kick at the panther, who dropped to the floor and did a stamp kick upward into the smilodon's chin, sending him stumbling backward. The panther was up on his footpaws again with a fast snap of his body.

"That all you got? Pffff," he snorted, bouncing on the balls of his footpaws. Bouncer blinked a couple times; he was weaving unsteadily on his feet, looking rather off balance.

"Time to say bye bye!" The panther said with a nasty grin, and raked out his claws at the smilodon's throat. But I'd known Bouncer long enough to know he wasn't punchy or out of steam. He was getting the panther off guard by using his specialty: drunken boxing. The panther's claws went right over Bouncer's head as the smilodon suddenly lurched backward and fell on his back, one footpaw flying up like a cartoon character stepping on a bar of soap. But that paw went up fast and hard, and connected with the panther's muzzle, knocking him back a couple steps.

Bouncer rolled over onto his side, still acting punch-drunk. He was on his hands and toes in a squat when the panther shook off the surprising kick and came at Bouncer's back, lifting up his leg to drop an axe kick on his head. Suddenly, the smilodon lurched up and backward like he was drunkenly stumbling to his footpaws, swinging an arm around and knocking the panther right on his ass.

The dark feline snarled in anger as Bouncer weaved about as if he was on the verge of collapsing, but still trying to fight. The panther rolled backward onto his footpaws again, and stepped in with an attempt at a fast uppercut. Bouncer weaved around in an almost comically excessive way, sweeping an arm around and clapping it around the other feline's neck like a drunk leaning on a drinking buddy for support. But he tightened his arm around the panther's throat; brought his other hand in to smack the panther hard in the eyes with the heel of his palm and swept his closest leg forward to kick one of the panther's out from under him, sending him crashing to the floor again.

Now in a completely reckless fury, the panther threw aside all attempts at martial arts. He just swept his arms out and launched himself off the floor in a sudden burst of speed. I don't know if it was luck or catching Bouncer off guard, but the smilodon got slammed up against the wall behind him, the panther's thick, burly forearm pressing down on his throat.

"Now you're dead, fucker!" The panther snarled. He brought his other hand around, claws bared like he was going to claw Bouncer's entire face off. But the smilodon was ready for him. He turned his head up and to the side, letting his body weight pull him down into a squat as he slid out from under the panther's forearm. The dark feline's claws met with tile, ripping a fist-sized hole in the wall as Bouncer suddenly shot back up into a standing position, arm fired upward like he was raising a glass in a toast, only he did it with his fingers pointed upward, claws extended. The panther's hands went to his own throat, blood seeping between the fingers as he hacked, sputtered, took two steps back then sank to the ground, falling to his knees, then flat on his face.

Tao managed to recover before me, groaning as he held his head. It took me several tries, but I eventually managed to stop getting my air in short, choked-off gasps after getting the wind knocked out of me. I felt like my entire back was bruised from getting slammed into the wall and like I had a brick-sized mark on my chest. I was slightly hunched over for a minute, but eventually I started breathing through my nose again and could straighten up, walking with a slow, careful step to the brochure room doorway. As I did, I watched as Bouncer clenched his eyes and mouth shut. Slowly, the bleeding gashes on his face sealed shut, and his black eye faded like colors fade in direct sunlight.

"What the...?" Tao said, as Bouncer opened his eyes again.

"Neat trick, eh?" he said. "The Dealer outfitted me with accelerated and amplified healing. Given enough time, whatever doesn't kill me doesn't make me stronger, but it doesn't leave a scar, either."

"Lucky you," The wolfpede said, stumbling a bit to one side.

"Whoa, hey! Are you going to be okay?! Do you have internal bleeding?" the smilodon said, reaching down to catch Tao before he fell. He turned to look to me; "Mike, what about you?!"

"I'm not done yet," I said, "though I feel like I caught a brick from a tornado to the chest."

"Sweet baby Jesus," Tao said, looking around at the mayhem. "What do we do now?"

"Let's see what we can learn before the police get here," I said. Looking the group over, I started going through their pockets, using a bandana from my own pocket to avoid leaving fingerprints. The group had sizeable rolls of cash on them in various denominations, but life isn't a video game, so I resisted the urge to pocket the money, instead putting it back where I found it. Aside from a few personal effects - things like hard candies, watches, and so on - Each one of them was carrying a keycard for a room at the Daydreamer Motel.

"Right, now for the car," I said. Taking a set of keys I found on the gryphon, I went to the sidewalk and hit the door fob. The car we'd seen the group driving blinked its lights. Putting the keys back on the body, I looked around as I approached the car. The few people who'd been at the rest stop had run when they'd heard shooting, apparently and were nowhere in sight. The car turned out to be a rental like ours; the vanity plate advertising the rental company was proof of that. The trunk, back seat and glove compartment were empty of anything interesting. Checking the visor revealed pay dirt; the gryphon's license was up there, identifying him as one Fred Tilghman.

I mused a bit, biting at my lip. I knew the name of the place this five-man-band had been hanging out, but the Daydreamer Motel is a chain, and I didn't want to have to check every one of them in a 20 mile radius. The car's built-in GPS gave me the answer.

"Alright Mr. Tilghman," I said to myself. "Let's see where you and your buddies were coming from." I tapped the screen, went to the route menu, and picked "previous destinations." An airport in Wichita came up, quickly followed by the address for a Daydreamer Motel on "River Road."

"Bingo," I said, quickly jotting down the address and Mr. Tilghman's name so I wouldn't forget. I was making sure I wiped off everything I'd touched when I turned and noticed Bouncer and Tao had followed me over.

"Why're you wiping it down?" Bouncer said.

"Well the cops are going to have questions," I said, shutting the door after making sure to relock everything. "I'd rather keep the delay to a minimum by keeping a low profile. I mean, we're gonna be honest when they ask us stuff, but no sense in drawing too much attention."

The smilodon and the wolfipede looked at each other, then looked at me.

"I know, I know..." I sighed; we all spoke at once.

"Too late."

The Daydreamer Motel was a simple, single-story building in an L-shape common to a lot of motels. I pulled into a parking space down near the end and we all piled out, quickly surveying the parking lot for anything out of place. Nobody seemed to be watching, and the only person in sight was a cleaning lady pushing her cart, so we headed for the check-in office.

The questioning by the police lasted an hour and a half while the paramedics patched up Tao and me. While I don't like Earth folks to rely too much on Canmephian tech, I was actually glad to see the EMT's were using Canmephian medical scanners and had other off-world medical tech. They found a bit of internal damage on both the wolfipede and myself, but were able to patch us up because they got to us so soon after the fight. Infection and other post-trauma complications hadn't had time to set in, allowing for rapid-response medications and techniques to do their work.

The police questioning was a bit tense, but when the officers asked, we just told them it was nerves from almost getting killed. The best stories are the ones with the most truth to them. I gave them a quick and dirty rundown of my case, and just referred to Bouncer as "my partner". When they questioned his lack of injury, he told them he was a trained martial artist and had also been able to shrug off most of the blows from his smaller opponents. The cops, having their hands full with five bodies, several of which were blatantly illegally augmented, didn't give him anything more than a cursory nod, saying it was "routine questioning".

I'd left the police my cell phone number in case they needed to contact us again later; risky, but necessary to avoid raising eyebrows. While I trusted the police to do their jobs, I wanted to know as much about our enemy as possible, and I preferred doing it myself to waiting for a police report.

The motel office had a laser light desk bell; passing my hand over the small metallic cone with a red tip on the end caused a digital chime to ring out, bringing a short, chubby badger to the desk.

"Hello there," he said cordially. "Are you gentlemen checking in?"

"Actually I'm here to meet someone," I said. "I'm looking for a Fred Tilghman; he told me he was staying here."

"Ah yes, Mr. Tilghman..." the badger tapped the screen of his desk-mounted computer. "He's in room No.7, third from the end. I'm not sure if he's in, though."

"Not a problem, we'll knock," I said. Tao led the way as we crossed the parking lot again. When we got to the door, the other two gave me a funny look as I rapped my knuckles on the door.

"You know he's not gonna answer," Bouncer said. "Guy's under a sheet 20 miles down the road."

"Yeah, but I did say I'd knock," I said to the smilodon with a grin. "Plus there could be someone else they didn't bring with them."

Thankfully nobody answered the door. I wasn't so lucky, however, when I thumbed the door button and found it locked. Fortunately Tao had the answer, as he nonchalantly walked over to the cleaning lady's cart sitting outside an open door a short way's off. The wolfipede quickly palmed the master keycard sitting in the top tray, swiped it through the door scanner, then returned it to the cart as I slid the door open.

The inside of the motel room was nondescript; motels the world over have the same setup; two beds, a nightstand between them, TV across the room, one table with two chairs, everybody knows the layout. There was a half-empty liquor bottle and a couple Styrofoam cups sitting on the table. Suitcases were lined up along the wall next to the dresser.

"Okay, check for anything useful," I said, pulling on a pair of black leather gloves from my coat pocket, mentally kicking myself for not thinking of them before. Tao and Bouncer, lacking gloves, grabbed a few tissues from a box in the bathroom. The suitcases held clothes and personal grooming supplies, but one held an envelope with five one-way tickets coming from Ontario. I quickly scribbled a note in my notepad. While Bouncer was checking the coat closet and Tao was looking in the dresser, I checked beside the beds; between the wall and the right side bed was a laptop plugged into a recharging outlet.

"Ahhh," I mused, picking up the computer and taking it over to the dresser. "This may be useful." The other two stood on my sides as I booted up the laptop. I couldn't help but smirk and click my tongue against my teeth as the desktop clicked into view.

"No password protection, how careless," I said. Then the password prompt came up when I tried to open several of the files.

"Hmm, I stand corrected," I muttered. I tried a couple obvious possibilities, but nothing worked.

"Either of you guys any good at cracking passwords?" I asked. Both my companions shook their heads.

"Damn," I said, "I'm no good at it either. Looks like we're not getting much else, but at least we..." Suddenly, a window popped up on the laptop like a guard dog sitting up. I felt an involuntary shudder go down my back, but noticed it wasn't a security alert. Instead, someone was trying to reach out and connect with our attackers by video chat. Putting a hand to my lips, I

tapped the screen, accepting the call but keeping the vid feed off. The other person did the same.

"Boys," a voice on the other end said. It sounded perfectly calm and collected. "I just saw the news feed from Wichita, what happened?"

"Hey boss," I said, doing my best to imitate the fox that tried to skewer me. "Those assholes made us, we had t' put 'em down."

"Ahh, I see. Well that's unfortunate," the voice said. When you think of a mad scientist, most people, I think, would expect a cackling, high-pitched, ranting maniac, someone channeling the spirit of Colin Clive's Dr. Frankenstein. But this person, he sounded reasonable, lucid and easygoing. I was about to find out just why that proved he was completely unhinged.

"So why's the vid feed off?" the voice said.

"We're havin' trouble with the camera," I said in the fox-voice, "I think we need to defrag this thing. That or take it to a shop."

"Hmmm," the voice said. A keyboard clacked, then suddenly the light next to the laptop's built in camera blinked on green.

"There," the voice said, a hint of smug self-satisfaction in it. "That fixed it. Hello there, gents."

"Damn," I muttered, dropping the false voice and crossing my arms. "Dr. Quipple, I presume?"

"Right on the head," the voice said, sounding magnanimous. "So, you three took out five of my guys. Not bad, not bad. You know that means we've got some openings; maybe you'd care to trade up from your current jobs."

"P'feh," I snorted, giving the camera an "oh please" look. "I'll pass, thanks."

"Hey, your call man," Quipple said; his voice making it impossible to picture him doing anything besides shrugging with a good natured smile as he did. "Either way, I'm going to get what I want."

"You're so sure of that, are you?" Tao said, arms crossed over his chest as he looked sternly at the laptop. "So far you're not exactly batting a thousand."

"Well maybe not," the doctor said with a slight grunt, creaking making it sound like he was shifting in his seat, "But I've got some more cards to play, plenty of guys to back me up and ahhh, the element of surprise. So I wouldn't count me out."

"Mmmm," I said. "Well without your goons on the ground here, looks like we've got that same element."

"Heh, got me there," Quipple said. "But hey, we'll pick your tracks back up fast enough and have

you dealt with." He said this in that same magnanimous, easygoing tone, like talking about killing someone to their face was the most natural thing in the world to him. Something about that made me feel a cold sensation in my stomach; the sensation of knowing I was talking to a genuine sociopath with no remorse.

"Cold-blooded sonofabitch, aren't you?" Bouncer said, sneering at the camera. "You can toss your best at us, and we'll send 'em back in fuckin' body bags."

"Ooooh, good luck with THAT, big guy," Quipple said. "You know...there's somethin' about you I recognize...heeeeeyyyy, are you one of Ramsey's boys?"

"Who?" Bouncer said, trying to look confused. I kept a poker face, but none of us were fooling Quipple.

"Ooooh yeah, I recognize his craftsmanship!" the doctor said, "Well it's good t' know ol' Hunter managed t' cheat death too; maybe when this is over, I'll get a chance to sit down with 'em and get caught up. I'll bet he'll love to get in on some of my projects."

"Pfff, in a pig's eye," Bouncer snorted.

"Hey c'mon, don't sell the doc short," Quipple said, still sounding as friendly as ever, despite the words coming out of his mouth. "He and I are cut from the same cloth, you know. He's not all hung up on all that morality junk most morons are. He'll probably not even mind me taking you out. In fact, I'll bet if I can take you alive, I can fix your head up so you'll be perfect to help with my new administration."

"You piece of SHIT," Bouncer said, gritting those formidable teeth of his and clenching his fists. I raised my eyebrow at the camera.

"And what administration would that be?" I said.

"Heh, weeeeellll I know how cheesy n' cliché this's gonna sound..." the doctor said, "Buuuut, tsk, what can I say, it just makes sense for me to be in charge of things."

"What THINGS?" I said.

"Heh, ALL THE THINGS!" The doctor said with a laugh. The lame internet meme aside, I got the message; it was the old world domination play.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I said. "Are you honestly trying to say you think you can, let alone SHOULD, take over every country on the damn PLANET?"

"Well I'm not gonna try to do it INSTANTLY," Quipple said with a chuckle. "I mean hell, I'm not a Saturday morning cartoon villain!"

"Could'a fooled me," Tao muttered.

"But really, it's not that far-fetched," the doctor said. "It's all just a matter of getting the right positions of power under my influence; a president here, a prime minister there, some strategically placed legislators in various governments. It's gonna take time, but hey, if you're gonna do something, you wanna do it right."

"And when you step forward to take your place as supreme dictator, then what?" I said, arms crossed again. "You think people are gonna just roll over for you?"

"Probably not," the doctor said. "That's what the internment camps and conversion labs will be for. Of course there will be plenty who aren't useable, there's a lot of genetic garbage out there that needs to be sifted out."

"This is ridiculous," I said, trying to fight this unconscious feeling that for all the hokey nature this speech had to it, it wasn't something to be brushed away. "You DO realize just how lame this idea sounds, right? I mean you're talking like some neo-Nazi, creating a new world order with genetic purity and all that garbage."

"Bud, bud, hang on there for a second," Dr. Quipple said, sounding like he wanted to have a "let's be serious here for a minute," talk. "I think we all know the Nazi's were a bunch of lunatics and deluded idiots."

"Right," I said.

"But not because they believed in genetic purity," said the doctor.

"What?" I said, giving the camera another "oh please" look.

"The Nazis said they were for genetic purity," Quipple said, "But in reality, they were working from racism, from a genetic BIAS. They weren't being scientific about it, not truly scientific. What they needed to do was take the best from all races and get rid of the worst; your mentally handicapped, your physically deformed, your genetic illness carriers, people with predispositions to various weaknesses that can be passed down, like weak immune systems, mental conditions we can connect to their natural body chemistry, stuff like that. If we want to be our best, we've got to stop ignoring our accidents."

"Oh yeah?" I said, feeling utter shock and revulsion going down my back. "Well I'd say YOU are the biggest ACCIDENT that needs to be taken care of right now."

"Ouch," the doctor said, "That's harsh. Seriously bud, if you stop and think about it, it's like that line from that old movie; 'I'm not a monster; I'm just ahead of the curve.'"

"You are so full of SHIT," I spat at the camera. "The world isn't going to be made BETTER by killing off anyone who doesn't meet some template for 'perfect'! Society is best when it finds ways to help EVERYBODY achieve their best, and when it values everybody's lives!"

"Oh boy," the doctor sighed, "you're one of those moralists aren't you? What's it from with you? Liberal politics, support the minorities and the underprivileged? No no, I'm not getting that vibe with you...I'm guessing you're one of those religious nuts; follow these rules 'cause the big invisible imaginary friend tells us to. Am I right?"

Now it was my turn to grit my teeth and clench my fists as I glared at the web cam, wanting to reach through and gouge out Quipple's eyes with my thumbs. "FUCK. YOU." I snarled.

"Look, I don't know about you, but I'm just trying to be sensible here," the doctor said, like the plan he was laying out was the most reasonable thing in the world. "I mean, I just want to make the world the best it can be with the best kind of people. Don't you want the world to be better?"

"Oh yeah," I said, "I do. But I DON'T think it'll be better built on top of a mass grave filled with innocent people CULLED LIKE LIVESTOCK."

"Thinking, feeling, sentient beings deserve better treatment than that," Bouncer said, glaring daggers at the laptop. "No matter WHAT their condition."

"You know, I don't know why we're getting so worked up over this dumbass," Tao said, snorting at the camera. "He talks big, but he's just a lunatic in a lab coat and a few freaks backing him up. He can't actually pull this off."

"Really?" Quipple said. The vid feed on his camera flicked on suddenly. The view looked like it was coming from a security camera, albeit with color. It slowly panned around a room, and what we saw was enough to make the blood drain from my face.

It was from the inside of some sort of warehouse by the look of it. Inside, there were several rows of surgical tables, each one with a figure laying on it, some lab technician taking readings, performing surgery or administering a shot by each one. The figures were of various species and genders, all with unnatural-looking attachments being added to them; tentacles, segmented limbs, sensory organs, exoskeleton plating. Some of them looked sinister but elegant, while others looked downright nightmarish. In the back, several "patients" were awake and being directed through some tests with their new augmentations; sinewy limbs folded and unfolded, boney armor plating emerged and retracted under skin flaps, objects hovered around black-eyed faces contorted in telekinetic concentration. There had to be two hundred of them altogether, probably more.

"Still think I can't do it?" Quipple's voice said.

"We're not going to LET you do it," I said, my voice tense as piano wire.

"Ah well, you can lead a horse to water," the doctor said, never once losing his composure. "We'll see you later."

The MalaDex office building was a two story modular office building; the kind of thing you'd expect to see in a contractor's catalog of standard models. With a bright blue sky behind it, a few clouds and a landscaped parking lot, it would have made a good photo op for a building ad. But this was just some unconscious musing on my part as the three of us made our way inside. Our tete-a-tete with the not-so-good Dr. Quipple had lit a fire under our asses; no way in hell we were going to let him snatch those cryo patients. Not without a fight, anyway.

The front doors slid open as we entered the office; a kidney-shaped front desk with a receptionist off to the left of the nondescript front lobby; a male elk looking up at us as we came in.

"Good afternoon; can I help you?" he said. Tao, having the most authoritative pull of our group, took the lead this time, presenting the receptionist with his GMA badge.

"Yes, I'm an inspector with the GMA," he said. "We need to speak with whoever in your company would handle volunteer patient records."

"Let's see, I think that would be...miss..." The elk traced his finger down a sheet of paper on his desk. "...Finley. One moment, I'll page her." The cervine tapped the screen of his vid phone. After he informed us the company rep would be down in a few minutes, we found seats in the waiting area of the lobby around the standard coffee table with magazines scattered on it. None of us really felt like reading, though; we all sat fidgeting a bit as we watched the lobby, ever on the alert in case more suspicious characters showed up.

"Bet you never expected an assignment to get this intense," I said to Tao as we waited. The wolfipede looked toward me and let out an amused chuff, grinning and shaking his head.

"Not in the slightest," he said. "I gotta say, with all this action, my job's suddenly gotten a lot more..."

"Nerve wracking?" I said.

"Exciting," Tao replied, getting a look of bemusement from both myself and Bouncer.

"Now there's an optimistic answer for you," the smilodon said. "Most folks would probably have shit themselves at this point and said 'I didn't sign on for this.'"

"My usual day," the wolfipede said, rolling his head around his shoulders and rubbing the back of his neck, "consists of going over routine reports and the occasional site visit. I've gotten to the point I can get through my usual workload in a third of the day. The rest of my time's spent with my thumb up my ass or monkeying around at my work station on this or that hobby and trying to make sure my supervisor doesn't catch me in the act."

"Sounds like your talents are getting wasted," I said. "If you're that good, I'd think the administration could give you a more challenging job; or at least enough work that you're not bored."

"Yeah, but that's bureaucracy for you," Tao said, smirking. "You know, when this is over, I think I'm gonna look for a career change. Interesting assignments like this don't come around nearly often enough."

"What'd you have in mind?" I asked.

"Well, long term, I figure I'd get into software design or computer programming," he said. "That's always a good field and there are a lot of different industries it's used in."

"Not a bad idea," I said. "You could get in with any number of companies or science research organizations."

"Yep," he said. "Course first I'll need to go back to college and take the necessary courses for it."

"You got enough saved up for that?" I asked. The wolfpiede looked off to the side with a hesitant expression.

"Eeeehhh, maybe, but it would take a chunk out of my savings," he said. "I was thinking in the meantime I'd take a short occupational course on bartending."

"No kidding?" Bouncer said, eyebrows raised. "If you do, let me know when you finish the course; we NEED another pair of hands at the WereHouse. Tandor's ready to collapse just about every night."

"I'll do that," Tao said; as if on cue, the elevator chimed and out stepped a palomino mare in a woman's business outfit.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said as she approached. "Amanda Fincley," she said, extending a hand to each of us as we stood up. "What can I do for you?"

"We need your help locating a cryogenic facility your company did business with a number of years ago," I said. After we'd given the mare the abridged version of our investigation, she put on a thoughtful expression, taking a pen idly from her breast pocket and rolling it between two fingers; from the way Ms. Fincley did it, I suspected it was a habit of hers when she was deep in thought.

"I think the person you need to talk to would be Mr. Marburius," she said. "He's been handling our record archiving. Let's go see if he's in."

The mare led us up to the second story of the building. Asking around for her intended introduction, one of the other office workers said the guy was on the roof, grabbing a smoke. We went up a flight of stairs to the roof and stepped out into the still air; good thing it was a dry heat that day or it would have been pretty damn unpleasant.

"Azrial?" Ms. Fincley said, looking around. Off to the right, looking out at the highway that went past the office, a sky blue canine with shoulder-length white hair and black-backed ears turned to

face us. Dressed in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and a pair of brown dress slacks, the canine had a mix of lupine and vulpine features; the differences are subtle, but there if you knew where to look for them. With a cigarette butt hanging from the corner of his muzzle, eyes that looked hard and keen, but an easygoing, almost devil-may-care crease to his mouth, the vox looked mature beyond his years.

"Ah, there you are," the mare said. "These gentlemen needed to speak to you."

"Mr. Marburius," I said, this time taking the initiative and extending a hand.

"That's my dad," the vox said, grasping my hand in a firm grip. Roughly my own height, maybe slightly taller, his build was like that of a gymnast; he wasn't bulky like Bouncer, but he was well-toned; through the thin material of his shirt, I detected muscles that were noticeably defined.

"I'm Azrial," he said.

"Mike Fang," I replied, the others introducing themselves in turn. "We need your help locating a cryo facility." I cut down the abridged version of our story even further, getting a bit tired from having to repeat myself so much. The vox nodded along, then took a last drag from his cig and flicked the butt into a partially sand-filled coffee can sitting on the roof's edge.

"Now that you mention it, I seem to recall that facility," he said.

"Really?" I said, "Good!" Finally, a break in the case. The others looked equally enthused.

"Yeah, I was interning here when the facility's parent company said they were closing out some sort of deal," Azrial said. He tossed his head towards the door. "C'mon," he said, leading us back inside. Her job done, the mare excused herself and went back to work as we re-entered the office.

"They contacted our company and requested we provide them with copies of all our records with them," the vox said, leading us to a small office. He dropped into his seat and started typing on his computer. "Then we got word of the legal trouble they were in, just after they called us and requested we delete our records of their involvement in our work; 'confidentiality reasons,' they said."

"I hope you didn't actually wipe your records of them," I said, slightly apprehensive. The vox grinned.

"They wish," he said, then looked back on his computer. "Let's see...we don't have the files on our system here...all those old archives were sent to a branch office for storage on local hard drives. No online access for security, but as luck would have it the office is in the same city the facility is, if I remember right."

"Awesome," I said, grinning. "Where is it?"

"Boston," Azrial said, "you planning on heading over there?"

"That's the plan," Bouncer said.

"Okay, I can send the office an email, telling them to expect you and to give you access to the..." the vox was cut off mid-sentence by his vid phone ringing.

"Oh, excuse me," he said, picking up the earpiece and putting it in. He tapped the phone's screen, but no picture came up.

"MalaDex, this is Azrial, how can I help you?" he said. "Yes I am...yes, we do..." deep down, an instinct was telling me this one-sided conversation I was hearing was something to be wary of. I glanced at the others; they seemed curious, but not quite as apprehensive as I was. Azrial, meanwhile, seemed to be looking rather surprised and glanced our way as he listened to someone on the other end.

"And what's the name of your research group?" he asked. "I see...I can't say I've heard of that one, where are you based?" The vox started typing on his computer again; I glanced at the screen. He was doing an internet search.

"And who's involved?" Azrial asked. "Well these are confidential records, I need to know whose requesting them...confidential too, I see. Well if you want our records of the facility, I'm afraid I need a name for our logbooks..."

I could feel my eyebrows just about fly up and hit the ceiling. Both Tao and Bouncer were looking equally alarmed. Locking eyes with Azrial, I started emphatically shaking my head while crossing and uncrossing my hands at the wrists in a "NO!" gesture. The vox looked at me with uncertainty, then looked at his vid phone for a moment. He looked back to me again.

"Okay...", he said, "if you could just give me a minute...", he fished out a pen from his desk drawer and slid a notepad from one corner of his desk in front of him. "And how do you spell that?" he asked, jotting a name down. "Okay then. Well, I'm afraid I don't have the files right in front of me, and it will take some digging to find them. Is there a number I can reach you at?"

More note taking ensued; Azrial nodded a couple times. "I see. Okay then, I'll need to run this request by my supervisor, but if he says yes, I will be in touch with you. Alright then, have a nice day." the vox tapped the screen. I glanced at his computer monitor; the results for the name he put in the search bar wasn't turning up any legit-sounding results for a research organization. In fact, it wasn't turning up ANY results for a research organization.

"Does this name mean anything to you?" Azrial said, spinning the notebook around with one finger for us to see. The name, Dale Betwell, certainly didn't, and neither did the number beneath it. I took out my notebook and scribbled them down for my own records.

"Okay," Azrial said, standing up and shutting his office door. He turned back to us and looked at each of us; the vox looked like he had a bad feeling creeping up on him.

"Is there something you guys haven't told me?" he said. I gave him a rueful look as I put my notebook back in my coat.

"Well, before now you didn't need to worry about this, but now...", I huffed a bit. "There's another group looking for this cryo facility. They're working for an outlaw geneticist conducting illegal experiments, Dr. Oscar Quipple. He wants these cryo patients for his own work."

"How bad an outlaw are we talking here?" Azrial said, crossing his arms reflexively.

"Torture, kidnapping, murder, breaking the Blue-Green Concordat," I said. "And that's for starters."

"Fuuuuck me," the vox said, clenching his eyes shut and shaking his head.

"Yeah, it's bad," I said.

"Does anyone here other than you know where the records of the facility are?" Tao asked. Azrial shook his head. "Then you're in serious trouble," the wolfipede said, getting a wide-eyed look from the vox.

"Quipple's goons won't hesitate to try and beat the information out of you if you won't give it up willingly," the wolfipede said. "Your company's got military contracts, right? My advice is to see if you can wrangle some temporary on-base housing; say that you need to supervise...something, I don't know. But Quipple's less likely to come for you if it means having to go through the military to do it."

Azrial looked off to the side, biting a bit at his lower lip. It looked like he was contemplating something...and from his expression it would be something some people would be really iffy about doing.

"When...were you guys planning on going to Boston?" he asked. We all looked at each other, then back at him.

"As soon as we can book a train," I said. "Wait, were you..."

"Going to come with," he finished for me. I was utterly flummoxed at this, and I wasn't the only one.

"Are you serious?" Bouncer said. "Man, no offense, but that's crazy." I couldn't help but chuff a bit.

"And your excuse is..." I said, grinning at the smilodon.

"I'm just as nucking futs as you are," he said, smirking right back at me. "But Azrial, this is gonna be stickin' your head in a lion's mouth."

"I know," he said. "But I've got my reasons."

One more time, we all looked at each other. I shrugged to the smilodon and the wolfipede.

"And our fellowship grows again," I said.

"I'll just be a minute," Azrial said as he dropped his house keys on his kitchen counter. "Just gotta throw some things in a bag and I'll be good to go." After explaining the need for an emergency trip to his supervisor, Azrial's boss agreed to his impromptu business trip. He also said he'd alert the rest of the company to Dr. Quipple and make sure nobody handed out sensitive information without a full set of security checks.

We milled around a bit as we waited for the vox to get packed; his house was simple, but functional; a living situation I was familiar with from back when I'd just started out as a private investigator. The only really noticeable thing was the punching bag hanging in one corner of the living room. The corner was set up like a small, personal gym space with a mat and a set of free weights as well. After a couple minutes, the vox came back out of his bedroom with a messenger bag backpack on his back. He'd also changed into a pair of beat-up looking jeans and a trench coat about as long as my own, only equally as beat-up as his jeans. Or maybe it was a duster, I'm not exactly sure. Either way, this was the only top garment he wore, coming out of his bedroom bare-chested and with his coat sleeves rolled up to the elbows, a full pack of cigarettes tucked into one of the rolls.

"Interesting outfit," Bouncer said with a grin. The vox gave him a lazy grin and an equally lazy shrug.

"I like to dress casual," he said. "'specially when I travel. So...," the vox shook the last cig of his old pack out, stuck it in his lips, and flicked a zippo open. "Let's get this show on the road," he said, blowing smoke.

We made our train and boarded without incident, and were soon making our way through the Midwest breadbasket. Around lunchtime, Tao and Bouncer went to reserve us a table in the dining car. I was taking advantage of the train's satellite-supported Wi-Fi to send the GMA an email updating them on our progress. Azrial was stowing our luggage in an overhead bin in our room as I tapped out a brief letter on my tablet.

"By the way...," I said, tapping the send button. "You mentioned you have your reasons for coming along on this."

"Yeah," he said. "You're curious, I suppose."

"I wouldn't be much of a P.I. if I wasn't," I said, stowing my tablet.

"Well, personal security, for one," he said. "Sooner these patients are found, the sooner Quipple

won't be looking for them anymore, and won't need me for anything."

"Okay, fair enough," I said. "But I'm guessing there's more to it than that. Is one of these patients a relative?"

"No," the vox said, putting his hands in his pockets. "Since you're curious, I want to see to it personally these people get found."

"That's certainly admirable," I said. "Not many folks tend to be that...altruistic these days."

"Well, I dunno if I could call it altruism," he said. "See, during my internship? I handled shipping and travel records for the company. And...among those were travel records for trial study volunteers."

"Ahhhh," I said. "Well, I wouldn't say you were at fault for anything the -other- company was doing."

"Yeah...", the vox said ruefully, looking out the window, "but I still feel like I could have done something besides sign off on the patients' tickets sending them right back to a company that was using them to cover up its crimes."

"Bud, you couldn't have known," I said, brow knitting a bit and leaning against the wall. "I mean I'm not trying t' belittle your concern or anything, I'm just saying...well, you couldn't have, you didn't have enough information."

"Maybe not," the vox said, shrugging. "But still, they could've used the help, and I wasn't able to help them before. Now they're in even deeper shit. I'd rather not miss the chance to help them again."

I nodded a bit. "Well, I have to say it's always refreshing to find this," I said.

"What's that?" Azrial asked.

"A kindred spirit," I said with a grin. The vox grinned back.

It was dusk by the time we arrived in Boston. The cool air greeted us as we stepped onto the train platform, a red, slightly cloudy sky backing the skyscrapers and older buildings in the distance. We skipped the vehicle rental for a change; the MalaDex local office was within walking distance of the train station, thankfully. It was after hours, but the company's employee ID's doubled as keycards, allowing Azrial to scan his badge at the door once we got there.

The regional office was one of your atypical prefab office affairs; the vox led the way into a back storage room where rows of shelves lined with external hard drives were waiting. I tried to shake off the feeling of being watched as Azrial used a wall-mounted terminal to look up the right hard drive, then plug it into the terminal. The darkened areas of the storage room, not reached by the few fluorescent lights we'd turned on, gave rise to all sorts of imagined threats. I

could tell from the way Bouncer and Tao kept looking over their shoulders I wasn't the only one imagining Dr. Quipple stepping out of the shadows while being flanked by a pair of his "volunteers" looking like abominations out of a survival horror game.

"Here it is," Azrial said. I looked over his shoulder at the address. Pulling out my smartphone, I brought up the GPS app and punched in the location. It took my gadget a few moments (I was roaming, after all) to find the location.

"Looks like the lab's located somewhere on the waterfront," I said. "Guess that figures; plenty of shipping and storage in areas like that."

"Makes sense," Azrial said, re-shelving the hard drive. "Shall we check it out now?"

"No time like the present," I said.

Twilight had set in, with the first few stars appearing overhead as we made our way down to the docks. Boston's seedier residents were hanging around on a few of the street corners and in some of the back lots we passed by, but they didn't do more than give us a passing glance. Not only did we have enough numbers to warn off most muggers, but our overall appearance would tell any gang-bangers not stoned, drunk or stupid (not that many of them AREN'T) that we were more dangerous than they were.

My phone beeped that we'd found our destination on the right as we headed up the waterfront street, brick warehouses that would have been dated back decades even in my day (and now dated back a few centuries) lining the wharves. An occasional sea gull cawed, and the smell of brine was heavy in the air; not unpleasant, if you like being on the water. I looked up at one of the buildings as I saw the arrow that marked our position on my phone screen line right up with the bull's eye that marked our target.

"This's it," I said. The building we'd come to was a three-story number. The sign on the side read "McAndrews Bro's. Rentals."

"You sure?" Bouncer said, looking quizzically at the building. "This doesn't look like it would house a cryogenic lab."

"Could be the company sold off the property when the execs were covering their tracks," Tao said.

"The lab itself could also be in a basement or sub-basement," I added. "More privacy and room to build if they went down."

The gate was unlocked, so we went into the loading yard. Trying the door on the building, I found it locked, natch, so I peered through the door's window.

"Uh oh," I muttered. "Bouncer, you may've been right."

The warehouse was, by and large, empty. A big, open space with skeletal I-beam supports was visible in the dying light. Off to one side, I saw a small, corrugated metal box with a window, revealing some office space, most likely for record keeping. But there was nothing like the kind of machinery you'd need to keep a huge lab running. Nor were there any visible doors that could lead to a lower level.

"What?" Tao said, going up and looking for himself. The smilodon and the vox also crowded around to look inside.

"You gotta be shitting me," Azrial said as we gave each other our personal space back.

"Is there any chance your records were wrong?" I asked, "Or falsified?"

"No," the vox said. "The time stamp was years ago, nobody's touched it since then. And the records show cryo-patients being brought HERE."

"M'kay...", I said, rubbing the back of my head. "I can think of two...maybe three possibilities. One, the facility IS here, we just can't see it. Two, the facility was on some kind of huge ship, like a tanker, that docked here. Three, this was used as a holding place for the patients before they were shipped to wherever the lab really is."

"Well whichever of those is the answer, we won't find out tonight," Tao sighed. "Let's get a room somewhere and we'll call this rental company in the morning."

The clerks at McAndrews Bros. were ones that, thankfully, took the idea of customer service seriously. After confirming there were no lower levels to the warehouse, the staff was prompt in going back into the old records for the property. As it turned out, they'd owned the building during the time the lab was supposedly in operation and had no records of any ship larger than a standard freighter putting into port at their docks. However, they had records of a limited liability company (a type of company often formed as a subsidiary of another one to handle specific projects) renting the place around the time of the lab's operation. The records showed they regularly moved cargo through the building; cargo identified as "preserved specimens."

"Rather impersonal," I said as I looked at the records.

"But telling," Tao added.

"So," I said, "If this was the distribution point, where were these 'specimens' coming from?"

"From the records...", said one of the clerks, looking at the listed results of a search engine, "It looks like they were coming from a port in the U.K.; a place called Ayr."

I pulled out my smartphone and punched in the name.

"Scotland," I said. "Guess we'll be sampling the local haggis."

The rest of the day was spent getting our travel accommodations taken care of. Booking a commercial flight would have been dicey for us; security measures had definitely streamlined since the 21st century. Where once boarding lines took a year and a day to get through, demanding slow scans of carry-on luggage and one-by-one scans of passengers by hand, having to partially undress before being allowed, now airports were outfitted with new security checkpoints that were much larger, able to scan multiple passengers as they rode a conveyor belt though a machine much like that from the original "Total Recall" movie. New detection software was able to identify not just metal objects, but certain chemical compounds, primarily things like explosives, illegal narcotics and so on. Improved sensors and imaging technology were also able to discern finer details in an object; no more pulling someone aside because security thought their hair dryer was a gun.

However additional scanning technology had also been added to detect genetic alterations, in the event of a wanted fugitive trying to leave a given country. Licensed mods carried the proper chemical signatures of the doctors that performed them, a lot like how polished gemstones are marked with a jeweler's tag. But these signatures were issued by the regulating boards, something Dr. Ramsey wasn't exactly on good terms with. Long story short, Bouncer had never seen the inside of a commercial airliner, and not just because several centuries hadn't managed to improve the quality of airline food.

Thankfully booking passenger space on a cargo freighter was less stringent, particularly with privately-owned freighters. The captain of the "Madeline's Smile" had named his modest-sized shipping vessel for his wife; he was a soft-spoken English human who met with us on the bridge of his ship as the crew was loading cargo containers. The captain was polite, but did insist on knowing as much of the facts as we were comfortable with giving him.

"Have to say gents, that's quite a story," he said.

"I know it sounds pretty hard to swallow..." I started, but the captain held up a hand.

"Oh I didn't mean to suggest I thought you were lying," he said. "And I'd be happy t' give you passage over, but I have to ask; since it sounds like time is of the essence, why aren't you taking a plane?"

"Well...", I said, rubbing the back of my neck a bit. "When we've taken the trains, we've found some of this scientist's henchmen watching the platforms, so we're hoping that taking a ship will be more discreet."

"That sounds sensible," the captain said, "But with all due respect, I can't help but think that's not the only reason."

I wasn't about to be the one to put a friend's neck on the line. So Bouncer decided to step up himself.

"Truth is captain," he said, hooking his thumbs into his pockets. "I have some genetic work that wasn't done by a licensed office. Makes trying to book air travel really inconvenient."

"Ahhh, I see." The captain said. "Well, you're not in any serious trouble with the law, I hope."

"You're welcome to do a criminal background check on me," the smilodon said. "I promise you're not going to find me on any wanted lists."

The captain thought a bit; I suspected he was weighing the importance of our trip against the risk to himself, his vessel and his crew.

"Well gentlemen," he said, "we'll do just such a background check for each of you. Provided we don't find any outstanding charges or other issues, we leave port at 4 p.m. this afternoon."

The seas were calm as we set out, our ship using the outgoing tide to help guide her way to the shipping lane and out to the open ocean. The sky grew overcast as we got further out, making me button my coat up and cinch its belt shut when I was out on deck. Azrial seemed remarkably at ease with the weather, still wearing his well-worn outfit. Then again, he seemed adept at making use of any available wind breaks, such as Bouncer. Standing downwind of the smilodon, the vox lit up a cig as Tao stepped out of a hallway, putting up the hood of his black sweatshirt.

"Captain said we're making good time," the wolfipede said. "We should make Scotland in about four days, using the currents."

"Excellent," I said, digging a hip flask out of one pocket and swigging a little whisky from it. "Exciting as this case's been, I'll be glad to see it done."

"D'you figure we gave Quipple and his thugs the slip?" Bouncer asked, pulling the zipper further up on his denim jacket. "We haven't seen 'em in a while, and it's starting to make me nervous."

"Keep expecting the other shoe to drop?" Azrial asked, blowing smoke into the breeze. The smilodon nodded.

"Makes me feel like he's waiting for us to lead him to the lab," he said. "I mean, I know that's what he's been doing, but his guys haven't been quite as subtle about it as they should. But lately, it's like..."

"They've gotten better at hiding," I said, taking a second pull. "Yeah, really makes you start looking over your shoulder, waiting for the Sword of Damocles to fall."

I said it before, and I'll say it again; sometimes I hate it when I'm right.

The weather didn't improve during our voyage, but otherwise the trip was pleasant enough...until we sighted the Scottish coast. A building storm that seemed to stalk the ship finally broke that morning, heavy rain, flashing lightning and thunderclaps loud and forceful enough you felt it in

your chest all ensuing. The crew spent a brief, harrowing hour securing hatches on the deck and making sure the cargo was secure, after which they all piled inside out of the howling winds and rain.

The four of us had joined the captain, his first mate and the ship's doctor for a poker game when there was a call on the ship-wide video communicator.

"Captain," one of the ship hands said, his voice coming out of speaker next to a touch screen on the wall. The captain stood up and went over to screen.

"Right here, Mr. Timmell," the captain said.

"I think we've got stowaways," the sailor said. Immediately, the four of us were on alert.

"What?!" the captain said, sounding both alarmed and irritated.

"I checked the cargo hold security monitors," the sailor said. "There's a cargo container open, and it looks like it was forced from the inside. Shall I take a look in the hold myself?"

"NO!" Tao, Bouncer and I said at once, getting a surprised look from the captain.

"We'd better go down there," I said. "This could be trouble."

The captain looked apprehensive, but nodded as I took my coat from the back of my chair and put it on (my hat I'd left in my room). Azrial stood up along with the rest of us as we headed down towards the cargo hold, several of the crewmen poking their heads out of their berths, giving us curious looks as we walked grim-faced towards the hatch that led to the belly of the ship.

"This may be a dumb question," I said, looking over to Azrial, "But d'you have any sort of fighting experience?"

"Been trained in kickboxing since I was in grade school," the vox said, rolling his head around on his shoulders, "and I've been in more than my fair share of scrapes."

"Well, I'm willing to bet this's gonna be worse than you've ever seen," I said as we got to the hatch. Bouncer took point, thumbing the button. Four heavy clanks came from the door as the locking mechanism released and the door slid to one side.

"That bad?" the vox said. I drew my revolver and silently looked at him. Azrial's eyes went from my face to my gun then back again.

"Damn," the vox muttered.

The inside of the cargo hold felt like a cave; the high ceiling making the room echo every movement, the lighting only pushing back the darkness slightly over the rows of cargo

containers, leaving plenty of shadows to skulk and hide in. Overhead a robotic crane was perched on a moveable rail system; a big mechanical spider used to pick up containers and move them around the hold. Outside, the sides of the hull thumped and groaned as the ocean rocked the ship, waves slapping the sides like hearing a hand hitting a box from the inside.

A box, or a coffin? I thought to myself, then immediately responded in my own head with *Get a grip, don't be morbid.*

We stayed together in a tight group, each of us looking in a different direction like a tactical military unit. I didn't know about the others, but I couldn't help but feel less like some elite fighting squad and more like the red shirt brigade...that or the dead meat side characters in a cheap horror film. That feeling was only strengthened by what happened next.

We'd gone maybe halfway down the length of the hold when a deep voice came from behind us.

"Lookin' for somethin'?" it said. We all turned, except for Tao, who'd been looking in that direction to begin with. Despite having white fur on his upper body, he somehow had managed to seem even paler. A stocky, heavily-built toad had stepped out from behind a crate. Clad only in a pair of jeans and a belt, his muscular upper body (though having a rather paunchy middle) was bare. The toad looked at us with a vicious gleam in his eyes as he cracked his knuckles. His broad mouth spread apart in a wide grin, parting his lips and revealing an unnatural set of vicious, sharp teeth that would have done a crocodile proud.

I was directly behind Tao, with Bouncer and Azrial on either side of us. Fighting back the chill that smile put down my spine, I brought up my revolver.

"PUT 'EM UP!" I yelled, cocking the hammer. In the space of two seconds, boney-looking plates suddenly slid out from beneath the toad's skin, covering his upper body and arms in thick plating. The amphibian squatted like a sumo wrestler, one hand on the floor to steady himself, then suddenly launched himself at us headfirst, teeth bared savagely. Tao hit the floor in an instant and I cracked off a shot. The bullet struck the toad in the shoulder, but only put a crack in his plating before he plowed into me headfirst, sending us both flying about ten feet. I slammed into the floor on my back and got the wind knocked out of me. The toad, meanwhile, didn't seem to like having his shoulder nailed with a magnum bullet, as he rolled off me onto his side, clutching at it and growling.

I saw Bouncer start coming our way, fists clenched, when suddenly an invisible force plowed him up against a cargo container hard enough to dent it. The smilodon staggered as he regained his footing, shaking his head to clear it as he faced his attacker. From the shadows between two crates stepped no one, but a pair of twin hares. Their fur patterns - what we could see of them - was odd; a set of symmetrical black-and-white patches that made them look like a Rorschach test when standing side by side. That in itself was a little off-putting; their compound eyes and the pulsing, artificial-looking organs on their heads only added to the unease they created.

Bouncer tried coming at them again, but another sudden wave of apparently telekinetic power slammed him up against the container a second time. Tao tried to come at them, but one of them

hoisted him up by the throat with a glare, leaving the wolfipede wriggling in mid-air. Raising my revolver, I was too slow, and the second hare glared my way; I suddenly felt my arm getting bent back at the elbow, my gun starting to come dangerously close to my own face...

That's when Azrial struck. The vox had ducked into the shadows when the toad had attacked, and had climbed up onto the cargo boxes to wait for the best moment to strike. With both lapine's occupied, he leapt down between them, performing a mid-air spin, both legs stretched out, nailing one hare in the back of the head and the other in the face. The lapines were floored immediately, and the rest of us were freed from their invisible grasp.

I slowly staggered to my footpaws, getting my wind back, when I heard a thud from overhead. I looked up and found myself staring at a repulsive-looking monitor lizard; the creature was probably Bouncer's height, but not quite as burly. He made up for that with a pair of appendages coming out of his back tipped with venomous-looking barbs and musculature that looked sinewy and strong, but unnaturally twisted around under his skin.

The creature leapt down and backhanded me across the face, staggering me to one side. He probably would have nailed me with those barbs of his, when Azrial ran forward leapt over me and started doing a veritable dance of midair stamping kicks against the lizard's head, chest and shoulders that drove him back.

The toad, meanwhile, was back up and turned towards me, teeth bared when a cougar-like roar came from the side. Bouncer came barreling up, claws extended, forcing the toad to turn and cross his arms to block swipes that left sets of grooves in the boney plates on them. The two started trading blows when I saw one of the hares start to get up. I drew bead on him.

"ON THE FLOOR!" I yelled, but only got a look of contempt from the lapine. A rattling sound came from the locking bar on the crate just behind him. Suddenly, it snapped free and came spinning at me, sharp end first. I dropped to one knee and fired off a shot, just as the bar went over my head, spearing another crate just between Azrial and the lizard, who were still squaring off. The hare dropped with a bullet to the chest while the lizard ripped the bar from the container and tried to swing for the bleachers with the vox's head as the ball. Azrial did a backward tuck-and-roll as the bar just missed him, came up in a handstand, then drove both heels into the lizard's chin.

The second hare was getting up and I started to draw a bead on him; he was a bit faster than his counterpart, however, and I found myself getting the same treatment Bouncer had. My back was feeling really bruised from the repeated slams, and I suddenly felt an invisible vice clamping down on my head. My hands went up to the sides of my head, sharp pains dropping me to my knees. The lapine glared at me with pure loathing in his expression as my skull felt like it was about to crack. That's when Tao recovered from the savage throttling he'd received, launched himself at the lapine, and drove his elbow right into the hare's face. The telepath's head snapped back, and the pressure around my head was mercifully gone. Grabbing Tao by the shirt, the hare brought his face close to the wolfipede's; from the expression on their faces, it looked like he was trying to squeeze Tao's brain out through his ears this time. But he made a crucial mistake bringing himself that close; Tao gritted his teeth in pain, cracked an eye open, then brought his

pincers together on the lapine's neck; the hare gave him a rather stunned expression as he went limp and slumped to the floor.

Meanwhile, Bouncer was still duking it out with the toad, whose protective shell was looking more and more worn, but still doing its job. Finally, the amphibian rolled back a step, bounded over the smilodon as he tried to drop a hammer punch onto the toad, and made for the door.

"I'll get him!" I called over my shoulder, taking off after the toad. I saw Azrial start to come after me too, but the lizard wasn't quite done yet. The reptile raked his poison barbs at the wox, who dodged back from them, then administered a brutal knee-slam to his head, dropping the lizard twitching to the floor with rather lifeless-looking eyes.

The toad had gotten the door open and bounded up the stairs by the time I got to the door myself. A few crewmen were looking from their cabins as I ran past them, following the trail of open doors until I came to an open deck hatch. A crack of lightning peeled through the sky as I stepped onto the wet, rain-drenched deck. The toad wasn't anywhere immediately to be seen; I slowly advanced out into the storm, turning and looking up to make sure I wasn't about to get jumped from an upper landing.

The ship tossed, making me lose my balance momentarily as a hard wave slapped against the side. Sweeping around each hiding spot on the deck, each equipment box, each lower deck vent, I didn't see my target until suddenly, the cover on one of the inflatable dinghies flew back, disgorging the armored toad. I was across the deck from him and heard him hit the deck wetly. I spun around and fired just as he launched himself. My bullet nailed him in a part of his armor that had been scratched and cracked thoroughly by Bouncer and broke through. But a body in motion tends to stay in motion, and the now-finished thug's last attack still hurled him into me, sending me flying back over the deck railing.

I caught the rail just in time with my free hand, the toad's body sailing on into the ocean. I gasped for breath, feeling dizzy from the repeated battering. I knew I couldn't hold on long with one hand, so I shoved my gun into my holster and tried to grab onto the railing with both hands. The wind yanked at me like a dozen sea spirits trying to drag me to the same fate of many an unlucky sailor, and I was failing to find the strength to resist them.

Suddenly, a large, burly figure appeared over me. In a flash of lighting, I saw Bouncer overhead, reaching down to grab onto my arm.

And in a second flash of lightning, I saw the look on his face as a heavy gust of wind broke the last of my strength and he just missed me. He yelled my name as I fell, the water swallowing me whole and sweeping me beneath the waves with a current, just before everything went black.

The scent of the sea, that light, salty, unmistakable smell, is one I've always associated with relaxation, calm, peace, and leisure. It's the smell I associate with a day at the beach, sunbathing, cold drinks and light snacks, fishing trips and time off from work. That may be why I was so

reluctant to open my eyes. My nose was filled with the fragrance of the ocean, and I heard the lapping of waves and seagulls calling.

I think I must have laid there for at least an hour or two, not sure if I was dead and taking a nap in Heaven or just unconscious. For a while, I didn't care, either. Then, slowly, that sense of "your time has not yet come" started to come to me. Like always, I tried to hit the snooze button on the alarm clock of my life, but I knew deep down it was time to get up.

I heard the sound of footsteps in sand, and they were getting closer. As consciousness returned, I felt my face half pressed into the sand, so I only opened the eye not pushed to the ground. I was greeted by a pair of bare, yellow, clawed footpaws. I looked further up and found myself looking at a peculiar face backed by a sky with broken clouds and sunlight starting to pierce through a dispersing storm. The person appeared to be some form of dragon, but a very unusual kind. His scales looked to be colored in alternating bands of red, orange and yellow. A shock of sky-blue hair crowned his head and came down to his shoulders, a pair of yellow horns (I think they were horns) poking out of them. His white muzzle was rather broad, and with his sharp-looking teeth, it seemed remarkably shark-like. His eyes were a brilliant red, like a pair of rubies with gold irises.

He was about my height, whoever this person was, maybe a couple of inches shorter and not quite as broad at the shoulders as myself. But he looked to be thicker in the body than I was, with a somewhat more muscular build and a stout torso. The beachgoer was dressed in a pair of khaki shorts, a white t-shirt and a khaki pocketed vest.

"Hello there," the dragon-like beachgoer said, a big, bright smile on his face. "Nice day fer'an outin' innit, though y'seem t'be a bit overdressed fer'et." The beachgoer spoke in a thick Scottish accent, and in my fuzzy-brained state, it took a couple seconds before I could piece together what he'd just said.

"Yeah," I groaned, the pains of a few hours ago coming back. "I guess I am. Though this trip to the beach was a little...impromptu."

"Aye, judgin' from th' look of ye, I'm naw surprised," the beachgoer said. "Y'need'ne help there?"

"To quote a movie," I mumbled. "Oh, all I can get." The beachgoer chuckled, carefully putting his hands under my arms and lifting up.

"Ere we go, upsidaisy nao," he said, "Just tell meh if somefin 'urts or if y'canna walk."

"I think I'mwhoa..." I said, trying to put my weight on my legs and finding my knees hadn't decided to wake up yet. "...not quite all there yet, apparently," I finished. The dragonish guy put an arm around my chest and one of my arms around his shoulders.

"Aye, I'm guessin'ye got knocked round abit by th'surf," he said. "Y'best come back with me, we'll get y'all sorted aout'n back'n'yer feht'n no time."

"I'd appreciate it, Mr..." I said; dizziness was making my head swim, so my guide had to aim me as I did my best to not lean on him completely.

"Geneford, Mal Geneford; ye'cn call me Mal, I'm not'all formal." He said, the name ringing a bell somewhere in the back of my head. "Aye, is'a gud thing y'washed up when y'did, I was jus' thinkin' a walk'en th' beach'd be nice afer being stuck'inna haous few th' las' tew days. I'm naw all tha' outdoorsy, mindja, but even I like a nice walk now'n'en. I 'specially like et when'm down 'ere onna cohst; me fam'ly's gotta lil' place up th'way here, spring'n summer place, yanno..." Chattering away like he didn't have a care in the world, the Scottish dragon(ish...person) lead me across the beach to a small, beaten-down footpath that went up a hill and into the green countryside.

The scent of wet, freshly cut grass was thick in the air as we crested a tall hill. As the sun dried me off slightly, I could feel the sand on the half of me that'd been laying pressed into the beach starting to dry off and blow away. Not all of it was coming loose, but it was enough to be noticeable. I wiped my other eye clear as we got to the top and took in the view.

"Wow," I said, "if that's your idea of a 'little place' I wonder what your idea of 'average' is."

A sizeable manor house sat partway up a taller hill on the opposite side of a small valley from us created by the distance between our hill and the one the house sat on. It was clearly an older building, three stories tall with gray stone blocks partly covered with ivy. A low stone wall, about hip-high on me, went around the immediate outside of the building, a gravel drive leading off from the front opening, curving away to go over a different hill some distance off to the right. From the occasional distant sound, the drive must have met with a paved main road somewhere on the other side of that far hill, granting the manor ample privacy.

"Aye," Mal said. "Be'et ever so humble, no place like 'ome." He continued to help me along as we made our way down the hill. But as we neared the bottom of the valley, he turned off the path and towards a modest cottage I hadn't noticed before to the left, something that looked like it would belong to a groundskeeper.

"OH!" I said, blinking, "Heh, sorry, for a moment there I was thinking that big place up the hill was yours."

"Oh it'es," Mal said amicably. "I jus' fig'red we'd go'en th'back way."

I blinked, slightly confused. The dragonish guy pushed the door open, revealing a simple country cottage interior one would expect to see in the rural U.K. I was led into the kitchen and my guide sat me down at the kitchen table.

"Now, lessee, which one wasset again..." he said, looking at several hooks used for hanging ceramic mugs over a counter space.

"What does...ooooohhh," I said, comprehension dawning. "You've got a secret passage to your place, am I right?"

Mal turned and grinned at me. "Aye, somefin like tha'." He gave one of the mug hooks a twist. There was a mechanical click....and suddenly the entire kitchen floor began sliding down at an angle, revealing the hidden elevator that slid smoothly downward.

"Holy shit," I muttered, eyes wide as I watched solid rock face on all sides seem to scroll up as we descended down into the earth. Looking over towards Mal, I saw him grinning ear-to-ear at me. I smirked and cocked an eyebrow.

"From the look on your face, I'm guessing you don't get to show off your kick ass back door very often," I said.

"Naw'as often as'id like," he said as the elevator slowed, a mild bump telling us we'd reached the bottom. A series of fluorescent lights to the left clicked on in succession, revealing a cylindrical corridor tunneled into the rock that curved off to the right after a short distance. Metal supports curved up the wall from a grid-shaped walkway padded with rubber safety matting. Slowly, I pushed myself up from my seat, Mal moving to my side.

"Mmm, I think I'm feelin' better," I said. "Lemme see if I can walk..." I moved a bit stiffly, my joints still aching a bit, but I was mobile.

"Yer'a quick heal, aint'ye?" the dragonish said, smiling as he walked with me down the tunnel.

"I've gotten pretty good at shaking off aches n' pains, and..." I said, then turned the corner and looked around, stopping dead in my tracks. "I reiterate: Holy shit."

What met my eyes looked like a cross between a bachelor pad and a super villain's secret lair. It looked like someone had taken a large, natural cavern and expanded it slightly, then installed all sorts of creature comforts, a personal armory and half of a mad scientist's lab. Off to one side was a massive flat screen TV that, to quote a famous game critic back from my original time "looked like the monolith from '2001' lying on its side." A wide overstuffed couch with a coffee table sat in front of it, a multitude of gaming platforms hooked up to the TV as well. Behind the couch was a fully-stocked wet bar, flanked by full-sized refrigerators; one apparently devoted to beer, the other to soda. A surround sound music system was built into the wall to the right of this, with mega speakers set up around the man cave area of the room. A personal computer was set up next to the television; a computer complete with a monitor the size of a movie poster mounted to the wall, an electromagnet-suspended office chair and personalized keyboard and wireless mouse. Other personal touches in artwork, collectibles and trappings were scattered around the area on shelves and book cases.

This was all to the left of the entrance. To the right, a huge holographic computer interface surrounding a wide, circular metal pedestal was putting out display readings for various computer systems. It looked like the computer was monitoring a variety of networks, with reports on worldwide stock exchanges, several global news feeds, a number of those jagged line graphics that accompany digital sound outputs, each labeled with a different branch of a different country's military, all coming in. Further down, I could see a number of what looked to be

scientific research stations, set up with a variety of lab equipment; most of it looked oriented for developing or studying mechanical or electrical devices. Finally, into the far wall a large, vault-like door was built. I could only see through a slight crack in it, but it looked like it opened onto a very long closet, and I could distinctly see several gun stocks from the crack, giving me a good idea what the rest of the room held.

As I looked around the room, I suddenly noticed something that made my eyebrow rise. I turned to Mal.

"You know," I said, "I suddenly have a sneaking suspicion that you finding me on the beach WASN'T an accident."

"Oh?" he said, sounding insincerely incredulous, crossing his arms and smiling at me. "An' what makes'ya say tha'?"

"Well, while this amazing personal lair is in and of itself not concrete proof you had any reason to be expecting me...", I said, taking a couple of steps into the room. I spun around on my heel. "There is one thing that lends credence to it."

"Mmm?" Mal said, looking at me expectantly. I turned and pointed; there on the wall over the bar was a carved stone emblem slightly larger than a manhole cover. From the aged, worn look to it and the way it was held in the wall by ancient-looking rivets, I figured it was almost as old as the cave itself; at least when it was first refurbished. Carved into the emblem was a candelabra with three candles, an eye in the flame of each one.

"You're Illuminati," I said. The dragonish guy grinned, looking over at the emblem.

"Ahhh, well spott'd," he said. "Bu', fer th'recerd, yer only 'alf right."

"Oh really?" I said; it was my turn to look incredulous now.

"Aye," Mal said, putting an arm around my shoulder and leading me over towards the man cave area of his domicile. "I'm Illuminati, 'at's trew...but me fam'ly, ets one o' the founders."

"YOUR family helped FOUND THE ILLUMINATI?!" I said. Mal grinned toothily.

"Actually, it's closer t'say other people helped US found'et," he said.

"If I say holy shit anymore I'm gonna wear the phrase out," I muttered, getting a chuckle out of Mal. He lead me over to a door I hadn't noticed towards the back of the man cave area of the real cave, revealing a full-sized master bathroom where I washed up while my dragonish host took my clothes and put them in what looked like a dumbwaiter, only instead of just rising up, it actually -teleported- my things away, with Mal's promise they'd be washed and dried and sent back in a short while. He also took my smartphone, which had been dunked in the drink along with me, and placed it on one of the work benches. A pair of automated, robotic arms extended from the table and began repairing the damaged electronics, copying data and replacing parts that

had been shorted out from the salt water wash it got.

"So given you being so high ranking in the Illuminati," I said from the shower stall of the bathroom, "you'd heard about the case I was on."

"Aye," Mal said, sounding like he was somewhere out in the man cave area. "We've gotta few people inna GMA keepin' an eye'n things. Ah's curious bout'cher work an' decided'ta keep tabs on ye. Tha' Quipple bugger sounds right nasty. My people'd been watchin' 'em befer, but when'eh decided t' play dead, he fewled even us."

"Yeah, I gather he's a slippery sonofabitch," I said, rinsing off and grabbing a towel to dry off. "But how'd you know about my going overboard?"

"Wall...", Mal said, the sound of a drink can being cracked open interrupting him momentarily. "Th'ship ye were sailin' on? Yeah, I use 'em frequen'ly. Cap'n let me know hew was trav'lin with'em, an' las' night'ah picked up on'es distress call 'bout'a man overboard. Found'es position on'a map an' figered if'eh didn'a pick ye up tha' night, I'd check th' beach, see if y'washed up."

"Well much obliged for that," I said, stepping out of the bathroom. Mal had left me a pair of shorts and a t-shirt with the Scottish football team's logo on it to wear while I waited for my own clothes.

"S'all good," Mal said. The dragon was stretched out on his couch, paws up on his coffee table, fiddling with a video game controller. "After yer suits dried, we'll give yer mates a call'n let 'em know where t' come. Then we'll see 'bout findin' 'ese frozen patients."

"You offering to pitch in on that?" I asked, sitting down on the couch next to him.

"Oh'aye," the dragonish guy said, slurping from a can of Irn Bru.

"Funny, I thought the Illuminati didn't get directly involved in stuff," I said. Mal gave me a bemused snort.

"Most'a th' rest of'em don't," he said. "Ah'm no'afraid t'get me 'ands dirty; I jus' make sure't keep ah low profile." He gave me a big, toothy grin. Several digitized explosions drew our attention to his flat screen; a retro 2D shooter's title rolled up from the bottom of the screen.

"Ahh, that looks a bit familiar," I said. Mal looked over towards me.

"Yew play?" He asked. He used his footpaw to slide open a drawer on the coffee table, revealing several more wireless controllers. I grinned and pulled out one that matched the system he'd booted up.

"Mostly PC," I said. The dragonish guy chuckled. "Aye, so'dew I; 'ats why I had'is machine made't connect to any network; PC or console."

"Damn, I thought they'd never get around to doing that," I said, connecting to my online gamer profile and logging into my character on the game, a side-scrolling paramilitary shooter with tons of guns, some serious looking, some seriously goofy-looking.

"Heheh, wall, le's make this interestin'," Mal said, that toothy smile on his face again. He looked up and to the side, raising his voice. "Oi! Gerald!"

"M'yes sir?" From some unseen speaker, a voice with a cultured British drawl spoke up.

"Send ou'fer an order'a pizza, would ye?" Mal said, cycling through the options on his character, selecting a rather kooky color coordination.

"Will the mahster be having his usual LORRY full?" the voice said, pulling off that uncanny ability of the English hired help to sound both accommodating and condescending, with a dash of long-suffering patience on top.

"Nah," Mal said, seeming not to mind his man's snark. "Jus' ah loadin' palate this time."

"A light snack then, very good sir," the voice said, sounding as though on the inside, he was despairing over his employer's habits. Mal leaned over on the couch as I was adjusting my own game loadout.

"Ah love pushin' Gerry's buttons," he said. "He keeps encourigin' meh t' act more befittin' my station, and sometimes ah dew...an' 'en sometimes I show up t' formal organization meetin's inn'a pair'a gym trunks an' fuck'all else."

"Absolutely evil, aren't you?" I said, looking to the side. The dragonish guy just wagged his eyebrows over those brilliantly red eyes of his.

"Anyway, here's th' deal," Mal said as the game started up. "Pizza'll be here in 'bout an hour or so; every 100,000 points ye get is worth one; heheh, le'ssee if ye can keep up with me."

"Heh, alright then," I said, cracking my knuckles and trying to get in "the zone". Ten seconds later, I was feeling like a dog with his leash tied to the bumper of a moving car. I've considered myself pretty good when it comes to video games; I may not have the fastest twitch reflexes out there, but I do my best at thinking ahead, strategizing, setting a trap and preparing ahead of time. MAL on the other hand, wasn't just taking me to school; he was privately tutoring me from kindergarten through high school, then paying my tuition to an Ivy League university, where it turned out he was my professor AND the dean. The dragonish guy was like some Scottish digital death machine, leaving a trail of pixelated carnage for me to wade through in his wake. I managed to hold my own against the enemies I managed to confront first, but really, they were just leftovers; table scraps from the bullet buffet Mal was serving up to a hapless video game that was probably wondering what it ever did to deserve this.

"Your pizza has arrived, sir," said Gerald over the intercom again. From overhead, about six feet (or two meters, since it was the UK) to one side from the man-cave portion of Mal's lair, a

pneumatic hiss preceded the descent of an elevator platform. Riding down on four hydraulic poles, a circular platform came down, revealing a hand cart with stacks of pizza boxes; they formed a cube the size of an easy chair.

"Perfect timin'," Mal said, "Les' check the scorebox..." I laughed the laugh of the hopeless and hopelessly amused as the dragonish guy brought up the game's score window.

"Is there really any need?" I said, putting my head on one hand, resting my elbow on my knee.

"Ahhh, don't be so hard on yerself," Mal said, "Ye did well. Look, ye made over 150,000." I glanced up at the screen, sure enough, I'd come close to earning two pizzas. Mal, on the other hand, would have probably won enough pizza to feed China if he'd ordered that much.

"Well, that's something," I said, leaning back with that same semi-whipped smile. "I didn't think you'd left me that much."

"So which toppin's do ya like?" Mal asked, jumping up from the couch. He grabbed the handle of the cart; it thumped heavily as he pulled it off the lift platform, the scent of tomato sauce, cheese, meat, onions, garlic and freshly baked crust wafting up from the crates.

"I'm a sausage lover, myself, but don't read into that too much," I said with a wink. Mal gave a bemused snort as he slid a box over the coffee table to me.

"Grab wha'ever ye like outa th' fridge t'drink," he said. "An' could y' grab me that Irn Bru twelve-pack?" Mal plopped back down onto the couch, flipping open the first pizza box. I jumped up from the couch myself, heading towards the fridge behind us. As I grabbed a bottled water and picked up the box of soda's by the handle, I froze. From behind me, I heard a sound that was like a cross between a power tool and a school of piranhas. I slowly turned around and looked behind me, just in time to see an empty pizza box get tossed over the back of the couch like a bone in a cartoon after a hunk of meat had been lowered into a lion cage. I reached for my watch, forgetting I'd left it in my luggage on the ship.

"Fuck, what was that, five seconds?" I said.

"Mmm, three, ah think," Mal said, turning to pluck the next box from the stack. I made it back to the couch with the drinks in time to see the floor show firsthand this time. Mal seemed to be simultaneously inhaling the pizza and snapping his jaws, the food moving as though it was on a conveyor belt into a saw mill blade. The second fully loaded, baked dish didn't seem to be eaten so much as it was dragged into a living food destruction machine.

I reached over to my own pizza box and bit into my first slice. It was top-quality stuff, for sure, everything made fresh. But rather than appreciating my own meal, I was like a moth at a flame, just entranced, unable to tear my eyes away from the spectacle next to me. For a full minute I was hypnotized as I watched the dragonish guy put pizza after pizza through the heavy-duty grinder that was his muzzle, briefly pausing between pizzas on occasion to take a long slurp off a soda can. I began to liken those moments to rinsing out a mechanism. Mal's torso had born well-

defined abdominal muscles from what I could tell from beneath his shirt; not quite in a V-shape, per se, but still defined. But as he buzz-sawed through his "light snack", those abs were starting to push forward. It was as if they were cobblestones that had a hill growing underneath them; a hill with sides getting steeper until they bulged into a globular curve.

After what must have been the 25th pizza, Mal leaned back a bit with his hands behind his head, paws up on his coffee table, crossed at the ankles. He ran his tongue across his teeth, smirking a bit as he picked up his current soda can, drained it, and crushed it in one hand. "ORRRRP!" he burped out, looking with smug satisfaction at the results of his binge so far. A bulging belly that stretched partway down to his knees, his shirt rolled up to his pectorals from its size, sat on his legs. The dragonish guy grinned as he looked at it, patting and rubbing it with one hand like his gut was a pampered lap dog.

"Full already?" I said, finally snapping out of my awe and raising an eyebrow. "You've only got another hundred or so boxes to go."

"Oh ah'll get t'tha inna minute," Mal said, scratching his bulbous gut. "Me arm's gettin' tired, so unless ye were gonna feed me..."

That's all the prompting I needed. I'd hopped over the arm of the couch, slipped around the back and grabbed the first box before Mal knew what the fuck. He just had enough time to look up and lock eyes with my own, which I'm told gets this really crazy gleam in it when I'm about to start feeding someone else's face. A pizza rolled up like a burrito was soon being shoved into that shark-like muzzle, cheeks pudging out like a couple of white cricket balls as I was already reaching for the next box.

"Remember," I said, barely restrained glee in my voice, "You said it, I didn't!" As I pulled out the second pizza, Mal chewed and swallowed. Then, he tilted his head back, grinned, closed his eyes and pointed with one hand into his open, tooth-baring maw, tongue lolling out at a slight angle from his chin. I introduced another pizza to it with the care and delicacy a person usually reserves for packing raked leaves into a plastic bag. When those jaws started snapping again, I yanked my hand back fast. Mal opened his eyes as he swallowed.

"Heheh, done already?" he said, licking some sauce off his nose.

"No no, just need to check..." I said. "Three, four, five, good." I made a point from then on to keep my digits on the far side of the food from the dragonish guy's nashing mandibles, letting go when the last couple inches (or centimeters) of pizza were about to go in. That big yellow-and-orange bulge in his lap gurgled with contentment as I fed baked dough, mozzarella, and toppings into Mal like branches into a wood chipper, making it groan and stretch as he shamelessly gorged with my equally shameless assistance. Occasionally, my gluttonous host would snap his fingers and point to the twelve pack, prompting me to yank a pull tab off another can of Irn Bru and tip it over his muzzle. I'd dump the entire can into Mal's maw in one go, resulting in a clatter as I dropped the empty can to the cave floor and a "BARRRRRRROOOORRRRRRP!" as he let out the carbonated aftermath.

Box by box and pizza by pizza went by. It took a full ten minutes to go through them all, even with Mal's considerable mandibular prowess. Part of that was because every so often, I throw him a curve ball by stacking two or three pizza's together and shoving them in all at once, eliciting a "GURK!" of surprise from my host, followed quickly by a devious flash of his eyes and several hard, powerful chews from his muzzle, sauce splattering over his face in a mildly disturbing way if you had an active imagination.

Finally, the last pizza was sacrificed to that seemingly insatiable maw. With a final, short "BORP!" Mal drummed both hands on top of a large, bloated ball gut that he could have sat in a wheelbarrow while standing up and it would still have come up to his pecs. It made churning noises like a thing possessed, but Mal just licked the last piece of pepperoni off his nose as I stepped around the side to apply my own massaging hands to the front and sides of his gut.

"MMmmm, yer good," Mal said, grinning toothily at me. "Ye've done stuffin b'fore, I'cn tell, BRAAARRRP!"

"Heh, and you're definitely no stranger to a good binge," I said. "Of course, I could tell that from the way your butler...,"

"Valet," Mal corrected.

"Sorry, valet didn't bat an eye at your order."

"Heheh, aye, ahm prob'ly one'a th' few people with'a line'a credit with every major pizza franchise," the dragonish guy said, belching again as I gave him a firm poke right in the belly button.

"Oh gewd, m'horn works, now test m'brake lights," he said with a snicker.

"I don't know about you," I said, giving his gluttonous orb a few more pats, "but I'd say your treadmill's gonna have to clock a few thousand miles to work THIS off."

"Naahhhhh," Mal said with wave of his hand. He grabbed the arm of the couch, which I was amazed didn't splinter and break off as he pushed himself to his footpaws.

"I gotta, NNNNGH, lil' trick't bounce back from'a binge," he said.

"Well I'd say you probably bounce pretty well with this," I chuckled, patting Mal's gut again with the back of my hand.

"Heh, watch 'is," he said, cracking his knuckles. Mal spread his legs for stability and clenched his fists. He put on an expression like he was trying to stare a hole into the wall straight ahead of him. Then, he started getting taller! Reptilian and shark features slowly started to go soft and morph, like clay getting warm. I watched, pretty sure my expression showed I was visibly impressed, as my host's already fairly muscular body started getting even beefier; muscles bulging in definition and becoming more and more massive. His height grew with his width. At

the same time, his stomach seemed to get compressed back into his body, his abdominals redefining themselves as a gurgling, roiling noise came from his entire body.

Mal's muzzle lengthened and I saw fur begin to spread all over himself. The funny thing was his clothing seemed to stretch with him; apparently he'd had his garments treated with a special fabric elasticizing agent, or so he told me later. It wasn't infinite, but it was enough to handle what he was growing into. White fur spread across his front, while orange-red fur spread over his face above the lower muzzle, his arms and legs down to the halfway point of his calves and forearms, and all over his back and his tail, with a white tip on the end. Brown fur like gloves and socks covered his hands and footpaws, while his hair went from blue to a red as dark and brilliant as his eyes had been. His eyes, meanwhile, turned a sharp, brassy yellow with black pupils. His horns softened and flattened into a pair of ears poking up out of his hair.

"I KNEW I'd heard your name somewhere else!" I said as Mal finished his transformation into a towering fox that looked so stuffed to the max with muscle he barely fit in his own skin and was ever-so-slightly impeded in movement by his own mass. "You're that bodybuilder from the workout supplement commercials!"

"Heh, aye, 'at's me," Mal rumbled in a deep baritone that sounded like a thunderstorm with vocal cords. "This's my more public face; ah use 'et whenever ah need't deal with m'families public comp'nies n' holdin's."

"Makes sense," I said. "So I take it one of these is your natural form and one you got from genetic alteration you got?"

"Heh, maybe," the massive fox said, hands on his hips as he made his pectorals do a little dance.

"So which is which?" I asked. The voluminous vulpine just gave me a toothy smile.

"If et is true, which'm naw sayin' et es, 'at's my lil' secret," he said. I just shrugged.

"Eh, no big deal," I said. A chime rang out from the other side of Mal's cave, from the lab-like portion of his lair.

"Ah, that'll be yer phone," he rumbled. "When y'call yer friends, tell 'em we'll met 'em in Ayr later. Ahm real careful who'a let know 'bout m' private quarters."

"Sure thing," I said, going over to the table and picking up my phone. It was like it was fresh out of the box; Mal's equipment had even managed to upgrade my storage space and battery life. I flipped through my contacts as my host returned to his dragon-like form, apparently having burned off all the bulge of his gut. It didn't surprise me too much; my friend Redwolf's transformation has a similar trick to it.

I hadn't added Tao or Azrial's contact information to my phone yet, but Bouncer was on my friends list. I flicked his number with a finger and put the phone to my head. Later, Tao and Azrial told me that when his phone started ringing, he checked the screen, then looked at them

with goggle-eyed shock as he showed them my name on the caller ID, then looked back at it dubiously. It almost got to his voice mail when he finally picked up.

"Hello?" he said, sounding both incredulous and surprised; clearly, he didn't know if this was a prank, a trick or something else. I decided to give him proof it was me.

"Seven days..." I whispered, then made a throaty rattling noise, ripping off two horror movies for the price of one.

"MIKE, IT IS YOU!" Bouncer shouted over the phone loud enough to make me pull it back from my head. Snickering, I reassured him, Azrial and Tao that I was alive and in one piece. The others had apparently arrived safely at Ayr not too long ago, and had made a beeline for the nearest office of Her Majesty's Coast Guard to mount a search for my dumb ass. To be honest, I was rather touched by how concerned the wox and the wolfipede got over someone they'd only known for a short while.

I arranged to meet with the guys at McLellan's Pub, then started to get changed back into my own clothes, which had just appeared in the teleporting dumbwaiter like a jinni emerging from a bottle. I had to say I was impressed with the skill of Mal's staff; they even managed to get out a few stains I'd thought were permanent and fixed a couple worn spots in my concealed armor. I was just putting my boots back on when Gerald chimed in again over the intercom.

"Sir, you have a call over the secured lines," he said, "a Mr. Satohari."

"Oh aye," Mal said, jogging quickly over to the wardrobe where he pulled the outfit he'd lent me, "All take'et down'ere inna minute, Gerry."

"Very good sir," the valet said. Mal started to quickly pull on a suit of clothes; a pair of heavy boots similar to my own, a formal looking vest with a short-sleeve dress shirt and a matching pair of slacks, and a military-looking trench coat, which he buttoned up and belted. I raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

"You always get dressed to take a phone call?" I asked.

"Video chat," the dragonish guy said. "An' when gettin' calls from guys like 'es, yeah. Ye'remember what my organization does?"

"Yeah," I said, crossing my arms. "It keeps other secret organizations from trying to pull people's strings for their own benefit."

"Aye," Mal said, tugging at his coat and making sure his shirt was tucked in. "Way I see 'et, 'ets the bes' way t' make sure th' world runs right. So ah often present m'self as th' leader of a group just like 'ese dark, shadowy, back-room-dealin' buggers. Slip 'en, make deals with' em, then fuck 'em over." Mal gave me a malicious grin.

"Devious, sneaky, and a little disturbing," I said.

"Thanks," Mal said with a shameless smile. "Ah do me best." He jogged up to the communications array he had, motioning to me with a finger to his muzzle to keep quiet. He cleared his throat several times, then turned to face the largest of the holographic displays. My host's demeanor changed rather drastically; his posture, body language, facial expression, everything about him made it look like an entirely different person was staring out from behind his eyes. The upbeat, quirky, good-natured Scotsman was replaced with a cold, mirthless, calculating figure whose posture and expression carried a strong hint of malevolence; hands behind his back, head tilted down ever so slightly, a deadpan expression on his face, Mal had gone from a generous, warm host to someone whose uncaring nature bordered on being a complete sociopath.

"On screen," he said flatly. The holographic display expanded to reveal a blue dragon dressed in a business suit, seated at an expensive-looking desk in an authoritative-looking office. The dragon carried an air of authority about him like his surroundings, backlit by a window with the shades partly drawn, throwing shadows around him in a way that would seem pretty imposing, though Mal clearly wasn't impressed. From my position, I could see that my hosts' own communication's hub had put up a fake background behind him to hide his personal lair behind a digital backdrop of a large, shadow-filled meeting room, multiple figures seated at a boardroom table, all looking as sinister and cunning as Mal. I was impressed with the facade; each of the digital characters moved individually, helping with the illusion.

"Yes?" Mal said, and waited expectantly for an answer.

"Good afternoon," Satohari said, "I'm calling to inform you that your order has been shipped; I have just received word that my people have met with yours for the delivery."

"Are all the ship's components accounted for?" Mal said. "I won't be satisfied if it can't perform." As he spoke, I was amazed at his ability to suppress his accent. If I'd met him for the first time at that moment, I wouldn't have been able to place his nationality; his voice was completely without any noteworthy traits...besides it's ice-cold nature, that is.

"All have been verified by my people," the Japanese dragon said, steepling his fingers as he leaned forward on his desk. "The ship is experimental, but all the results show this unit is capable of matching the Canmephian vessels in terms of interstellar travel."

"Good," Mal said. "Your payment has been sent. Now, we have another business item."

The Japanese dragon blinked and looked slightly confused; this, apparently, wasn't expected. If I've learned anything about secret organization types, it's that they hate it when things don't go exactly the way they expected.

"We do?" Satohari said. Still, Mal betrayed no emotion.

"I want you to cancel your arms deal with the Iranians," the dragonish guy said. Satohari jolted in his seat; he couldn't have been more shocked if Mal had reached through the holo-screen and

punched him in the face.

"Deal with..." Satohari said, but Mal cut him off.

"Don't bother denying it," he said. "I've been told by reliable sources that you're selling a cache of surface-to-surface missiles to the Islamic radicals. You will drop this deal. Now."

"Why do you care who else I deal with?" Satohari said, a hint of menace creeping into his voice. Mal never lost composure.

"Their plans interfere with my own," he said. "That's all you need to know. And unless you want evidence of OUR deal being delivered to the Japanese authorities, excluding my own involvement so you will take all the punishment, you won't ask any more questions and you'll cancel the Iranian contract. Immediately."

"This is outrageous," Satohari said, looking like steam should have been shooting out of his collar.

"Tough shit," Mal said coldly. "Do it."

The Japanese dragon glowered at my host, looking like he was trying to make Mal's head explode through sheer anger. But the dragonish guy was like a rock, doing nothing more than blinking.

"Very well," Satohari said, sounding like a guard dog being dragged back on its chain as it tried to lunge at someone.

"I'll be watching you." Mal said, and reached out, tapped a holographic interface, and cut the video off. My host turned back towards me; as quickly as it had been adopted, the menacing, Machiavellian sociopath personality faded away, and those red eyes of his sparkled with mischievous glee.

"An' tha's how ye dew 'et," he said, flashing me those pearly whites. I smirked and started to say something I thought would be appropriately dry and witty, but Gerald cut me off.

"Sir, you have another call," the valet said. "It's a Mr. Dale Betwell."

In the back of my head, alarms started going off. That name sounded familiar. I pulled out my notebook, the pages warped by the water but still legible since it had been dried (probably in front of a desk fan). Sure enough, I found it; the same name used to try and get Azrial to spill information on the cryo patients' holding company.

"It's Quipple," I said to Mal. The dragon looked to me in alarm, then turned and looked back at his communication array.

"Gerald," he said, "es' he callin' on th' secure line?"

"No sir, he's calling the public line to the manor," the vale said.

"Ah'll take 'et here," Mal said, clearing his throat again. When he spoke next, his voice was that thunderous rumble from his behemoth fox form.

"Voice-only, pick up," he said. A wavy-line sound graphic popped up on screen. "Mal Geneford," he said.

"Mr. Geneford, my name is Dale Betwell," the voice said. My fur went up on the back of my neck; Quipple was putting in a personal appearance again. "I'm with the Global Medical Association; I have reason to believe a member of your household staff may have encountered a patient from one of our institutions."

"Really?" Mal said, eyebrow raised, cocking his head to one side like a curious dog. "What would'e be doin' in my necka th'woods?"

"This patient was being transferred when he broke out of custody and escaped off a ship," Quipple said, sounding as level and unassuming as ever. "He's a mental patient, you see, and suffers from violent delusions of persecution. We'd appreciate it if you could hold onto him until our staff arrives at your home to pick him up."

"Hmm, I see...," Mal said, tapping the holo-console a couple times. It brought up a screen indicating a trace was going on. However, the trace indicated the signal was getting bounced all over the world from Shanghai to San Francisco.

"Ah think ah could have my folks keep 'em calm wall'ye got out 'ere," Mal rumbled. "Ah, which office did'ye say y'were with?"

"The GMA office in Liverpool," Quipple quickly said without missing a beat.

"Never knew the GMA t'scramble their phone calls," Mal said.

"I don't know what you mean," Quipple replied. Mal snorted, crossing his arms.

"My caller ID's state'a th' art," the dragonish guy rumbled. "An' ah've got connections, so why don' we jus' drop th' act, Oscar Quipple."

"Wow...," the doctor said. "I'm impressed."

"Mmm," Mal said. "So wot'd'ye want?"

"Alright, down to brass tacks," the doctor said. "You're entertaining someone at the moment that I need to have my people...detain. So, you just let us take care of our business and everything'll be hunky dory."

"Mmm," Mal said again, still using his giant fox voice. "An' if'ah have a problem with tha'?"

"Then I think we'll need to detain you as well," Quipple said; he didn't sound threatening or terse, but indifferent.

"Ah don' think ahll let yew," Mal snorted, starting to look pissed. A brief pause ensued, followed quickly by Quipple chuckling.

"You know, I gotta admit, I was kinda hopin' you'd say that," Quipple said. "I've looked at footage of you Mr. Geneford and I gotta say, you're an incredible specimen. I think if my boys can managed to get you in once piece...or at least in as few pieces as possible, I'll be able to make some really amazing stuff from you."

"Aye, well..." Mal said, looking down at the floor and scratching the back of its head. "...yer clearly a ravin' cock bag, an' ahhhhh....ah'd laugh if ye din'ae creep me th'fuck out so much. Also, ef yer gonna threaten me, be'er get yerself some lubricant, 'cause ah'll fuck yew up sky high."

Quipple just chuckled again. "Wouldn't bet on that, chief," he said; the line went dead, the words "Call Ended" flashing onto the screen. Mal turned to me.

"How could've known yew were here?" he asked, voice returning to normal. "My place's shielded from electric signals in' shit."

"Then how'd my cell call go out?" I asked.

"Oh I put yer device on m'list of permitted ones," Mal said. We both blinked and I quickly pulled out my smartphone again. A fast run of my security ware located it; a virus on my phone.

"SHIT," I said. "Quipple's people must've put this on here somehow." I stabbed the screen as it asked me if I wanted to delete the offending program. Quipple couldn't track me that way anymore, but it was a little late.

"Sir," Gerald's voice said, sounding a bit alarmed. "Were you expecting any large shipments today?"

"No, why?" Mal said, looking alarmed himself.

"There are two trailer lorries coming down the front drive," the valet said. Mal quickly turned to another holographic console.

"Security, surveillance, front entrance," he said. A video feed snapped into view from just below the balcony over the dragonish guy's front door of his manor house. It looked like the kid gloves were off; Quipple wasn't even trying to be subtle anymore. A pair of tractor trailer trucks were coming in through the front gate. One of them turned to the side and blocked the front gate with its trailer. The other one pulled around so it's rear was pointed towards the house. The back opened up, disgorging at least two dozen paramilitary-looking assholes. Some were armed with

military-grade weapons, others were even more genetically enhanced than the creeps I and the others had fought so far, and THAT was saying something. The thugs we'd faced so far could have passed for normal (or socially acceptable, at least) when not openly displaying their enhancements. But Quipple had decided to send us something from his more elite troops; nothing could have made the exposed veins and unnaturally oversized and twisted musculatures on some of them look normal. The blatantly artificial-looking organs grafted onto others, with orifices that opened and closed over clusters of quill that dripped with something unpleasant, were also too big to cover.

"Ooooh fuck," I said, clenching my teeth. Mal, however, just scoffed.

"Oh please, they think they can jus' force 'ere way in'ere? Security, activate auto-turrets an' security shu'ers."

From outside, three circular sections of the front patio rose up, revealing mounted miniguns. Although I couldn't see it, from sounds I heard off in the distance, I gathered large, metallic shields were dropping in place over the manor's windows and doors. Quipple's goons froze when they saw these. Mal smirked and tapped part of the holo-console.

"'ere, whaja thinka 'at, eh?" he said, apparently into the outdoor loudspeaker. "Yew lot piss off, fore'ah mow ya fuckers daown." Crossing his arms, Mal smirked at the screen. That smirk lasted just until he noticed three of the doctor's thugs dragging some large piece of machinery out of the back of their truck.

"Awww, fuck-a-doodle-doo," Mal said. He stabbed a holographic button, the turrets on screen starting to rev up. But no sooner did that happen than the thugs switched on their apparatus, which had several long, thick antennae coming out of the top.

"What is that?" I asked, the dragonish guy clenching his eyes shut in frustration.

"An industrial-sized ECM jammer," he sighed. I was about to ask what that did when I saw first-hand. The turret guns began to randomly twitch and swing their aim all around, like a sentry who just got something blown in his face. Then, then went dead, their barrels hanging limply towards the ground. I just caught sight of one of a trio of goons flipping us the bird over the security feed as they marched toward the front of the manor. Then the feed went dead.

"Well, your shielding will keep them out, right?" I asked Mal apprehensively.

"Should," he said with another sigh, putting his hands on his hips. Right on cue, Gerald chimed in.

"Sir, the uninvited guests appear to be attacking the front door," he said. He was still maintaining that customary British calm and composure, but he didn't have that hint of dry, witty sarcasm he'd had before; now he sounded all-business. "It's difficult to tell without the security system, but it appears they're using something caustic to try and melt the shielding off at the joints."

"Ge'all th' house staff t'the safe rooms, Gerry," Mal said, marching purposefully towards the door that lead to the munitions room. I followed after him; the room turned out to be built a lot like a walk-in closet, only about four times longer. Racks of longarms and pegboards of sidearms lined the walls, while waist-high cabinets contained a variety of grenades, ammunition boxes, emergency medical supplies, and body armor.

"Got any .357 long rifle?" I said, checking my revolver.

"Yew bet," Mal said, pulling open one drawer, revealing a large box filled with speed loaders. I filled a pocket as Mal went and picked up a tricked-out assault rifle. From the slightly worn look to the padding in its cradle, it appeared to be his weapon of choice. He also grabbed a sawed off, pump action shot gun, strapping a leg holster to his left thigh as he slid it into place.

"Mind if I...?" I started to say.

"Sure, 'elp yerself," he said. I looked around, seeing what caught my eye. The dragonish guy had a vast collection of rifles, shot guns, submachine guns and pistols. Then I saw something that spoke to me.

"Is that a Stoegeer 12-gauge coach gun?" I said, going to one of the shot guns and taking it off the wall. It was well maintained, it's nickel finished, double barrels polished in a way that would make it a bit impractical for hunting; but then again I wasn't out to bag a few ducks.

"Y'like 'at one?" Mal said, strapping on a tactical armor vest, sliding his trench coat on over it before dropping several magazines into the pockets. "Ah'don' get much use out of 'er, so she's all yers."

"Wow, thanks," I said with a grin as I loaded a couple of shells into the gun from a drawer just below it. I clipped a belt-mounted ammo pouch to my hip and put a full box of shells inside as Mal took a short felt strap out of the armor drawer, slicked his flyaway mane back and tied it off in a quick-and-dirty ponytail so it wouldn't get in his face.

"Righ'," the dragon said, picking up his assault rifle. He pulled back the slide to load the first cartridge, then thumbed the button on a laser sight. "Les' go say hello."

I couldn't resist; I snapped my new scatter gun shut with a flick of my wrist, then rested it across my shoulders.

"Groovy."

The circular lift that had brought down Mal's pizza order lifted us upward into a long, tubular, vertical passage. Mal and I flicked the safeties off our weapons.

"Gerry," Mal said, " 'es everyone safe?"

"Yessir," the valet said, his cultured tones coming from a speaker on a control pad on the lift

platform's railing. "I've attempted to contact the authorities; apparently all emergency services and police are currently dealing with a severe traffic accident and chemical spill on the road 20 kilometers on the other side of Ayr from us."

"Probably done as a distraction," I muttered.

"Aye," Mal said. The elevator lead first to the kitchen, a large affair that looked like it could cook a royal wedding banquet. Mal lead the way to a side door that went upstairs, then down a hallway that doubled back to the front entrance. A large foyer was waiting, polished marble floors with an open space that had a railed second floor balcony. overhead was a large skylight that kept the foyer well-lit during the day, apparently. Two staircases lead to the upper railed walkway. Downstairs, the front door was muffling the sound of straining, breaking metal. I shouldered my shot gun as Mal reached into a coat pocket and pulled out a round C4 grenade.

"Yew ready?" Mal said. I nodded.

"As I'll ever be," I told him. Mal smirked and looked up a moment.

"C'mpewter, home speaker syst'm, home invasion track," he said. I cocked an ear; from hidden speakers around the house, a techno rock beat started to play. I recognized the tune from a popular online shooter; "Razormind" was the track title, or something like it.

"You're as crazy as I am," I said to Mal, grinning. He just grinned back.

"If we're got'a fight 'em, may'swell dew 'et in style," he said.

The front doors flew open as Mal yanked the pin with his teeth and hurled the grenade through the front door. It bounced once on the foyer floor before landing outside and detonating with a heavy BAM! Smoke and gravel sprayed through the door as the echoes of the explosion slowly died off. Then two freaks leaped through the doorway. I saw the air move like a water bubble as one of them performed some sort of telekinetic attack while the other, one of the hunchbacks with the grafted-on organ, let loose with a spray of stinger-like organic darts. As far back as we were, the spread was too wide to hit either of us, giving me time to line up my sights and let loose with one barrel, then the other. The psychic took the shot in the head and went down twitching, while the hunchback took his to his graft, snarling and lurching off to the side to take cover under the upper balcony.

The music started picking up tempo as I ducked down behind a heavy-looking hardwood cabinet in front of the balcony railing as I broke open my coach gun and reloaded. Looking around the side, I saw another goon, one of the twisted juggernaut-looking ones, come trundling inside, lugging a light machine gun with him. The thug may have been heavily armed, but the way he fanned the gun, pocking the walls and balcony around me and Mal with bullet holes, made it clear he couldn't aim for beans. He didn't take more than three steps though the door before Mal peppered his head and shoulders with rifle-caliber rounds. It took five bullets finding their mark in his head before it broke through his enhanced skull, but he eventually dropped to his knees, then fell face forward in the foyer. Mal emptied the last of his clip into the next thug to come in

behind the behemoth, then ducked down to reload.

I leapt to my footpaws and brought up my shot gun. A trio was making a bull rush through the door. I stuck two fingers into the trigger guard and fired both barrels at once. Two of the three invaders went down, the third scrambling back through the door as I broke open my gun and flicked out the shells.

"These idiots aren't exactly master tacticians," I said, digging a reload out of my ammo bag.

"Aye," Mal said, slapping his new clip home and yanking back the slide. "Ah think th' bastards in charge are testin' us; sen'in cannon fodder t'see wot we got."

"Right," I said. Then something occurred to me. "Or d'you think it's a distraction?"

Mal looked at me, then looked around us. As if on cue, doors on our right and left burst open! better equipped, tactical commandos leveled assault rifles at us. They got off several shots, but the dragonish guy and I both ducked in time to avoid the crossfire, then cut loose on them, Mal dropping two on his side while I dropped one and sent the other packing.

"C'MON!" Mal slapped my shoulder and pointed his thumb at a doorway behind us. It opened onto a hallway that stretched the length of the house, windows on the left and doors on the right. Mal slammed and locked the doors behind us, then motioned for me to help him shove a big, heavy, antique dresser on its side to block the doorway.

Mal took cover behind a chest of drawers, focusing on the door in front of us as I looked for my own spot to hide. Suddenly, an ugly-looking ridge of serrated bone suddenly came ripping through the blocked door, leaving a long gash through it. A second and third one followed, and the door handles fell to the floor with a triangular section of the door. Mal fanned the doorway, the heavy rounds going through the wood.

I took several steps back and away to get further out of Mal's line of fire. That's when motion outside the window got my attention; a rope had dropped down from above, and suddenly another commando was rappelling down! I whipped up my coach gun; one shell shattered the window and the next one blasted the commando, dropping him straight to the ground with an audible THUD.

I would have reloaded, but there was no time. No sooner did I drop the commando than the doors burst open behind me. One of the freaks with bone claws like that fox back in Kansas burst out. Without hesitating, I turned and slammed the butt of my gun into his torso, then brought the barrel around and cracked him in the side of the head. He swiped at me with both claws, sending me lurching back. Mal started to line up his sights on my attacker, when suddenly the door behind him opened. The goon jumping him had electric pads on his palms, much like that raccoon from before. Mal raised up his rifle to butt his attacker in the face, but before he could, the thug gave him an open-palmed slap to the side of his head; electricity cracked loudly as Mal dropped to the floor with an agonized look on his face, as well as an electrical burn.

Mal's attacker bursting onto the scene had distracted me; a bad slip-up on my part. My own attacker, who had inordinately long arms, shot out a punch, gashing open the side of my face painfully. I clapped a hand reflexively to my cheek, then did a heel-stomp right to my own attacker's torso. It shoved him back against the doorframe, giving me time to pull out my revolver and put a hollow-point round right in his chest.

I spun towards Mal's attacker. The thug had kicked the dragonish guy twice in the ribs and was hauling back his hand to give him another electrified blow to the head. He was a pretty big guy; it took me three rounds to put him down, but he eventually staggered away and dropped to the floor. I ran up to Mal, but looking over my shoulder, I saw four or five of the invaders trying to get the doors at the end of the hall open.

"SHIT," I hissed through my teeth. Mal was still reeling from getting both electrocuted right to the head, then stomped on. I grabbed his arm and dragged him into the room the electric freak had come from; a guest bedroom. Slamming and locking the door behind us, I kept dragging Mal through that room and into the next one, which had an adjoining doorway. The rear guest bedroom was slightly larger, with two outside balconies with glass balcony doors and a skylight. Slamming and locking that door as well, I turned to Mal.

"You alright?!" I asked, grabbing his hand again and trying to help him back on his footpaws.

"NNNNNNGH!" The dragonish guy groaned, hand clapped to his head. "I'll live." He used his rifle, which he managed to keep a grip on through sheer tenacity, to steady himself as he took a knee; we both started reloading. Suddenly, we heard multiple heavy footsteps on the roof overhead! I jerked my head up, gritting my teeth as the music began reaching one of its crescendos. I cocked the hammer on my revolver and tensed for the attack. Two commandos suddenly jumped down onto the balcony and were met by the last of my magnum shots. A third one dropped down as well, and I whipped up my shot gun in my other hand and sent him flying over the balcony's railing.

The sound of the skylight shattering made me spin on my heel. Another of those juggernauts came through and dropped to the floor. Before I could get my shot gun aimed where it would do the most damage, the monster delivered an uppercut to me that caught me square in the chest and threw me against the ceiling. Plaster rained down along with me as I slammed face-flat to the floor.

The behemoth balled up his fist again, when a thudding shot gun report made him double over, his back peppered with shot. Mal stood behind him, snarling, his pistol-grip pump action in his hands. The twisted juggernaut whirled around on him, only to catch a second blast to his front. The juggernaut took a swing at Mal, who ducked it and thrust his shot gun so it was right up under the hulking freak's chin, one quick pull of the trigger and Mal had done some rather grisly redecorating.

The behemoth fell to the floor with a palpable THUD. My chest had finally subsided to a dull ache as Mal came over and grabbed my outstretched hand.

"Y'alright?" he asked, I winced a bit, but nodded.

"Yeah, I'll live," I grunted, pulling myself upright after the dragonish guy pulled me to my footpaws, chuckling something about role reversal.

"Gewd, c'mon 'en, we're naw done yet," he said, clapping me a couple times on the back as I reloaded. Mal cracked open the other door, which lead to the hallway. He then motioned for me to follow him, and snuck out in a walking crouch. Following him out, I could see about eight of the invaders stacked up on one of the doors we'd shut behind us, getting ready to breach it.

"Dinn' wanna use 'ese indoors, but..." Mal said under his breath. As we took positions behind a couple of cabinets in the hallway, he pulled out another grenade. The dragonish guy bowled it across the floor toward the knot of invaders; one of them turned around and looked down just as it bumped into his heel, going off with a blast that blew the doors they were next to off their hinges and sent the thugs flying like ragdolled enemies in a FPS game. Three of them started to try and get back up, but were quickly sent back down as Mal and I cut into them with our combined fire.

I loaded two more shells into my coach gun as quick as I could; Mal slapped the bottom of a new magazine home as we slowly approached the doors back out to the foyer. After the last of our shots had stopped echoing through the halls, I'd fully expected a new gang of thugs to descend on us, but it was suddenly quiet. I didn't like it; it seemed too soon to have driven off all of Quipple's thugs yet, which meant they must be up to something.

Mal went up to an intercom on the wall, pressing it with the side of his hand; his eyes never left the door we were approaching. "Gerry," he said, "ETA onna authorities?"

"They've only just finished cordoning off the chemical spill, sir," the valet said. "It will be at least another half-hour before they can get here, presuming they're not waylaid further."

"Righ'," Mal said, "Keep tryin'," he released the call button with a muttered "fuck" under his breath. Motioning for me to help, Mal and I pushed the tipped-over cabinet aside and cautiously stepped out into the mansion's foyer again.

The aftermath of our last firefight was still there, a few dozen new bullet holes peppering the walls where shots had gone astray. Cautiously, we descended to the ground floor. It was there we saw what was coming. Mal clenched teeth and hunched his shoulders unconsciously; my eyes went wide and I felt a cold drop go down my back as we both saw a military-grade mounted machine gun about three quarters of the way back from the door in the mansion's front yard.

"Oh SHIT," we both said, and dove behind separate pillars. Tracer slugs big enough for anti-aircraft purposes thundering towards us, the sounds of shattering glass and chipping plaster and stone. The air started getting choked with the rock and plaster dust. The dragonish guy started to duck around the side to return fire, when suddenly a second shattering of glass overhead drew our attention. A half-dozen commandos were at the foyer skylight, and started raining down bullets towards us! We had to slide around further behind our pillars, which the mounted gun

was slowly chipping away at. Sweat poured down my brow and the sides of my head; our options were getting as narrow as our cover, and time wasn't on our side. Mal's background music still thumped and pumped, though, keeping us on our adrenaline rush, if the war-like assault wasn't enough.

God Almighty, I thought to myself, *Get us through this is one piece, I'm begging you...*

I looked to the side; Mal looked like he had his rifle in a death grip. He looked to the side and met my eyes. I just barely made out the words "COVER ME" from him over the chaos; the dragonish guy pointed to me, then up at the skylight, then to himself and out towards the front. I nodded; it was do or die time.

Mal counted down on three fingers; I made sure my safety was off. As he dropped his last finger, I wheeled around the side of my pillar and let loose with both barrels upward. One commando dropped and the others instinctively drew back from the edge of the skylight. I didn't have time to reload; I dropped my shot gun, drew my revolver and thumbed back the hammer, taking a shot at the first sign of a thug showing himself. Mal, meanwhile, had gone into a crouch and whipped around, flicking a switch on his rifle, setting it to single shot. Slugs whizzed past him, but he remained rock steady, eye focused on the view through his scope. I cracked off two more shots to keep the skylight commandos off balance, dropping a second one. In rapid succession, several things happened.

A machine gun slug caught me in the back where I'd leaned out too far to get a clear shot. It felt like a cinder block to my back, my armor barely keeping me from death. I was thrown violently forward, dropping to the floor.

A crack came from Mal's rifle, a single, well-aimed bullet streaking out the door. It nailed the gunner right in the head, and he fell forward onto his gun, the barrel pointing down into the dirt.

The remaining commandos moved forward. A three-bullet burst of rifle fire nailed Mal from above and behind, throwing him to the floor much like myself.

I pushed myself up onto my elbow, firing off the last of my shots in my revolver. Mal rolled onto his side, hip firing his rifle up towards the skylight. The commandos retreated back from the skylight again; they clearly saw they had the advantage, and I had to admit as Mal and I both painfully, agonizingly pulled ourselves up, it looked like we were on the ropes as the dragonish guy's background music track came to an end.

"They're down," we heard one of the commandos say from overhead. "Move in, mass rush to the front!"

I was hunched over as I picked my coach gun up off the floor. It was starting to feel hopeless, with gunmen at the skylight above us and more about to come charging through the front, but I still fumbled the gun open and reloaded. Mal slapped his last clip into his rifle; if we were going down, we were going down swinging. Out front, we saw over a dozen figures massing together as we finished reloading. Mal and I locked eyes one more time. Like soldiers about to charge the

enemy front, we nodded to one another. I crossed myself, throwing out one last silent prayer.

Time seemed to slow down a bit; apparently Mal and I both had the same idea. Walking out from behind out pillars like a couple of action movie heroes, we strode towards the front doors like we didn't give a damn. It seemed to catch the invaders off guard; more than one of them blinked in surprise. We got right up to the doorway, shouldering our guns just as our assailants did the same.

Then laser fire from the heavens came down at them. Both Mal and I were more than a little surprised, and immediately lowered our guns in a combination of shock and exhaustion as the remaining thugs were riddled with burning hot beams of concentrated light, dropping them in ones and twos to the gravel. A few shots rang out from the roof, and several more laser blasts streaked towards their origin; bodies fell through the broken skylight behind us.

God, is that you? I thought, then looked up. Well, it wasn't God Himself, but I'd certainly argue He'd sent who'd shown up. A sleek, star fighter-style spaceship was coming down towards us from just out of a cloud formation. Retro thrusters kicked up dust, sand and gravel as it slowed its decent. Like a bird coming back to its nest, it settled in one corner of the mansion's walled in front yard. The cockpit slid back with a pneumatic hiss, a cockpit ladder unfolded from the side, and a familiar figure descended.

"Issat who'a think 'et is?" Mal said. I could only grin and chuckle.

"E'yep," I said, putting my coach gun on my shoulder (the one that didn't throb from getting shot in the back). Gravel crunched as the unexpected, but very-much welcome face approached.

"Perfect timing," I said.

"Actually I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner," said Admiral Redwolf.

I slowly slid my shirt back on, rotating my shoulder a few times. Mal's house staff had done a remarkably fast job of fixing up my shirt, jacket and even my armor; about as remarkable as how fast Redwolf managed to patch both Mal and myself up from the beating we took as we sat in Mal's study; one of the few rooms in the mansion that didn't get shot up from the assault. The drygerskunk offered to get a crew of Canmephian contractors out to fix up Mal's home, but the dragonish guy insisted on calling in his own people; politely but firmly.

"Ah 'preciate th'offer, but ef th' wrong pe'ple knew about m'private affairs, ah'd have'ta kill 'em," he said. Redwolf smirked in amusement, but quickly realized from the honest expression on Mal's face he wasn't kidding.

"Ah, ooo-kay," Red said. I chuckled a bit as I flipped my hat back onto my head. Outside, the regular authorities had finally arrived. They'd taken our statements without a lot of second glances or doubting looks; I had a feeling Mal had some connections with the local authorities that ensured they trusted his word. Now a small army of CSU units was collecting the remains of our assailants, their trucks and their vehicles. I was honestly surprised at how brazen Quipple and his people were getting; I realized they must've known we were close to the cryo facility, and

were getting desperate.

"So how'd you get involved in this?" I asked the drygerskunk. Red bagged up hir medical supplies and slid them back into the left side of hir triple-breasted cleavage (where shi kept a physics-defying pocket) and re-buttoned hir uniform.

"I have a connection with the GMA," shi said, "and so it got passed to me through the grapevine as part of a general report on GMA activity. It wasn't too hard to follow your trail from there."

"But why'd ye decide t' step in?" Mal asked. "S'not like this's normal Canmeph bis'ness."

"If it involves a friend, it becomes my business," Redwolf said, getting a grin out of me. "Plus there's lives at stake. Now you're right, it's technically not a Canmephian issue, so I couldn't order the troops in without accusations of abusing authority, but that doesn't stop me from doing something personally."

"I see," I said, "So's there any blanks I can fill in?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact," Redwolf said. "But rather than make you regale me with a story, how 'bout I save you the hassle and take the direct approach?"

"Heh, normally I wouldn't mind telling a story," I said, leaning back in the overstuffed easy chair I was sitting in, "But under the circumstances, go right ahead."

Redwolf put two fingers to hir temple and cocked hir eyes to one side. I relaxed mental defenses that over time had become second nature to me and allowed a sensation of mental tingling to pass over me. It only lasted about a minute; afterward, Red lowered hir hand.

"Got it," shi said. "And holy shit, does Dr. Quipple sound like a freak."

"And then some," I said. I stood up, checking my pocket watch. "Well, if your house staff can handle the rest of the cleanup," I said, turning to Mal, "We should probably go and meet up with the others now."

"Aye," the dragonish guy said, slipping his own coat back on, hands in his pockets.

"Others?" Redwolf said, head cocked to the side.

"Heheh, got some more new friends to introduce you to," I said. Not wanting to cause an even bigger stir in Ayr than the rumor mill was probably already creating, we decided not to take Red's spaceship into town. Instead, Mal brought out a vintage (well, for the time now; back in my day it would have been one of the newest models) four-seater, high-performance Aston Martin. The car provided a smooth, luxurious ride through rolling green hills to the port city. The streets were busy with plenty of people out and about as we weaved through the modernized districts; in the northern part of town, we came to a stop in front of McLellan's, a well-preserved classic pub.

Once inside, it wasn't hard to find the rest of my impromptu fellowship. Both Azrial and Tao greeted me with relieved expressions and claps on the back, while Bouncer hauled me up in a bear hug and almost re-broke my ribs. Introductions were made for Mal and Redwolf, the latter of which just about everybody knew from news footage, the former introducing himself simply as "a pers'n'ah some authority, buh le's just leave 'er there fer naow," followed by a grin and a wink.

We ordered a round of drinks while I brought the others up to speed on Quipple's latest head-rearing. Tao had looked slightly paler as he sipped at a gin and tonic; Azrial looked a couple times like he was going to spit take; Bouncer just clenched his eyes shut and shook his head.

"This's gone on long enough," the smilodon muttered, slugging down his beer.

"A-fuckin'-men," Azrial said. "Hell I haven't been in this as long as the rest of you, and I'm already eager to put it to bed."

"Wall I c'n certainly pitch in 'ere," Mal said, "Ah got ways'ah searchin' an area."

"Good," I said, "Meanwhile the rest of us can keep following the bread crumb trail."

After lunch and a few rounds of icebreaker drinks, Mal headed back to his place to get some equipment while the rest of us headed to the port authority, picking the trail of the cryo-patient shipments back up. The patients, once arrived, had been handed off to a local shipping firm that had taken them inland. None of the original drivers still worked at the firm, but the GPS records of their routes were still on company files. The people at the company were refreshingly helpful, giving us full access to their archives so we could search out the area the deliveries were being made to. Apparently the deliveries were all made to the same public storage facility in a small town some ways off, but a quick call there revealed no sign of the patients. However, one old security guard recalled some frequent deliveries made there that were immediately picked up by trucks bearing the cryo-facilities company logo.

"So they used that as a final dropping off point," I said, tapping at a spot on a GPS map. "It must have been the closest spot to the facility they could find." I called up Mal on my cell; apparently the dragonish guy had a small squadron of remote controlled camera drones. From his headquarters he could scour tens of thousands of acres at a time. I gave Mal the location of the drop-off point so he could focus his search. It was about an hour later when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

"Ah found 'et!" Mal said. "Et's in th' highlands, tucked inna valley b'tween two steep cliffs."

"Great!" I said, turning to the others. "Mal found it; Tao, get on the horn to your people." The wolfipede nodded vigorously, pulling out his smart phone.

"Oh dick diddle," Mal said. I turned back to my own phone. "What?"

"Aaaahhh...ah think ah see some'fin movin' in'a nearby fields...looks like...e'yah, 'at's Quipple's

pe'ple."

"FFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFFUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK," I hissed through my teeth, turning to the others and delivering the bad news. They took it about as well as I did.

"How close are they to finding the place?" I asked Mal.

"Closer than we'd like," Mal said, "but we can prob'ly still beat'em to th' place if we hustle."

"Any chance of calling in the local authorities?" I asked, "Hell, maybe even the military?"

"From th' look'a th' numbers, local author'ties'd be out-gunned," Mal said. "An' military ah've called, but th' nearest base's 'alfway 'cross th' country; et'll take 'em three hours or more t' get 'ere."

"Red," I said, "Call in some of your own forces?"

"Eeehhhh," the drygerskunk said, looking off to the side and rubbing the back of hir neck. "Still a local issue; can't call in backup unless I'm in direct threat."

"Great," I said, rolling my eyes. "Looks like it's up to us again; just keep your finger on the send button until after they fire the first shot."

Yew fellas come by my place," Mal said. "I'll help ye gear up."

Returning to Mal's mansion, I found the dragonish guy had laid out an assortment of weapons and armor for folks to choose from. I stuck with my own guns, Redwolf had hir own armament, and Bouncer confessed he was a terrible shot because most normal weapons were too small for his massive mitts, so he had no real practice. Tao, on the other hand, selected an excellently preserved and maintained M1A Garand. The classic American "battle rifle", it didn't have the full-auto capabilities of an assault rifle, but it had range, knockdown power and accuracy in spades, plus the automatic cartridge feed allowed for more frequent shots than a bolt action rifle would allow. On top of that, Mal provided the wolfipede with, I kid you not, a genuine, Japanese-crafted katana and a tanto. I saw Tao pause for thought as he accepted the two blades; I knew a smattering of Japanese culture, so as I refreshed my stock of shot gun shells and magnum rounds, I leaned over to him.

"Bud, I think you've definitely earned the right to carry them," I said. The wolfipede grinned as he tucked the blades into a borrowed belt. A reinforced vest, made of the same sort of material as my own concealed armor suit, fit nicely under his black hoodie, leaving his arms free to swing his blades as necessary. Azrial, meanwhile, selected a pair of H&K MP7's; a German-made submachine gun that looked like something of a modernized version of an Uzi. While he was packing a duffel bag with reloads for us all, he came across something I wasn't expecting Mal to pull out for us.

"Oooh, I think I'll take this," the wox said. I did a double-take in surprise. Azrial had found

himself a Shoulder-Launched Multipurpose Assault Weapon; a rocket launcher. Gun nut that I am, even I had to feel slightly apprehensive as the vox loaded a separate duffel with several rockets. Redwolf, meanwhile, turned to Mal.

"Who did you say you were again?" the drygerskunk asked. Mal just chuckled.

"Ehhh," I said, eyebrow raised as I looked at the serious firepower the vox was shouldering, "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Don't worry," Azrial said, pointing his thumb at his weapon. "While I was on a base for one of my company's contracts, I sat in on a training session on how to use these. The training sergeant was nice enough to let me fire a few practice rounds with the trainees."

"Okay, well that's good," I said, "But are you sure we're gonna need..." I stopped myself and thought a second. "You know what? Stupid question, just make sure you keep it unloaded until you've got a target." The vox chuckled, adjusting his own armored vest, which he wore under his ratty trench coat. Both he and Bouncer had outfitted themselves with armored vests to leave their arms free for hand-to-hand combat, as well as armored knee and shoulder pads. The smilodon wrapped his hands and fingers tightly and tugged on a set of ratcheting straps on a pair of custom-made, steel-toed boots.

"Right," Mal said, pulling his own trench coat on once more, covering his sawed-off on his leg. He slicked back his hair into a ponytail again and shouldered his assault rifle. "Once more inna th' breach, dear frien's."

Mal had called in a private helicopter to fly us directly to the facility. He'd been relieved to see the pilot sent in response to his call was one of his company's best; the dragonish guy told us he sometimes got saddled with some moron who was constantly missing pickups and drop-offs. The bright green, rolling hills of Scotland swept past us as we headed towards our destination. Both Mal and Redwolf were pretty calm about the whole situation; unsurprising given Red's military experience and Mal's apparent familiarity with conflict. Bouncer seemed in control, but alert, with crossed arms and lazily swishing tail, a tapping footpaw being the only indicator he wasn't completely laconic about the whole situation. Both Azrial and I were a bit more fidgety; the vox was fiddling with his SMGs, checking their action and making sure the sights were straight. Myself, I'd already checked my own guns, so I spent my time fingering my rosary and praying to God that He would once again showed His boundless patience with me and get us all through this mess in one piece. Tao, meanwhile, was doing remarkably well, considering the anxiety problems he'd previously mentioned. His arthropod lower half coiled up beneath him, eyes closed, hands folded in front of him, the wolfpede was in a state of genuine meditation.

"We're almost there," the pilot said over the intercom. "Comin' up on the landing pad." I looked out the side window; the hills rose up sharply into a craggy-looking pair of cliffs. Tucked between them like a necklace jewel between a woman's breasts was what we'd been searching for all these crazy days; the cryogenic storage facility. The building was constructed like a military bunker, from the look of it. It was all concrete and one story on the surface, a short dirt road leading out of the valley from its front, a helicopter landing pad on the left side of its entrance.

The chopper thumped lightly as we came to a landing. Tao's eyes opened as Mal pulled threw open the chopper door, rotor wash stirring the air and making everyone squint. We piled out of the helicopter, Mal slapping the pilot-side window and pointing up. The pilot gave him a thumbs up as the wash picked up, the chopper taking off and heading back the way it came.

Redwolf lead the way as we headed to the doors. The place had a serious industrial feel to it, with reinforced metal doors that would've looked fitting on a military warehouse. The drygerskunk went over to a keycard reader, morphing two of hir fingers into a flat, card shape and slipping them into the slot. Hir eyes flicked left to right like shi was thinking hard, followed quickly by a series of metallic clanks and rumbles. Slowly, the doors opened like a mouth, part sliding up and the other sliding down, revealing a mouth in the form of a large freight elevator platform, floodlights shining out from the rear, making us squint and turn away briefly.

Wordlessly, we entered the elevator; in the back left hand corner was a control pad, the caked on dust an uneasy reminder of just how long the poor devils who were frozen here had been abandoned. A quick press of the down arrow button and the lift rumbled to life; power cables long dormant suddenly had electricity running through them again, and machinery groaned as it awoke from hibernation. The lift began to slide down on a diagonal path, descending about the length of a football field before sliding to a stop at the end of a concrete hallway half again as wide as the lift platform. The hallway was lined with doorways. As we made our way down the hallway, we poked our noses inside to see what they were. Most of them turned out to be storage rooms with various chemical containers. Several more were various kinds of labs, dust covered microscopes, spectrometers, examining tables, MRIs and x-ray machines covered in plastic drop cloths, while one lead to another, smaller freight elevator that went straight down.

Finally, we reached the end door of the hallway. Azrial hit the button and the door slowly slid open, revealing what looked to be a control room of some sort, a large wrap-around control panel stretching from halfway down the left wall, around the far wall underneath a large window that ran the entire length of the far wall, to halfway down the right wall. The panel was decked out with various computer screens, keyboards, slider controls and the like. Looking around, I spotted a main power box and threw the red-handled switch on its side. Computer monitors lit up, text scrolling across. Apparently the room was used to monitor and maintain the cryo-storage systems, having gone into standby mode since the company that built it had abandoned it years ago.

"Looks like all the cryo-patients are in good condition," Redwolf said, going up to one of the consoles.

"Good, but where are they?" I asked, looking around. The room beyond the far window was pitch black, though I got the impression we were looking out at a large, open storage facility from an elevated position.

"Hang on...," Red said, tapping a few keys on the keyboard, "Powering up the storage facility lights...there we go."

With a series of clicks, the room beyond the window lit up with rows of fluorescent lights clicking on one by one. The room was large enough they didn't illuminate it completely, but they let us see the majority of it.

And dear God, was there plenty to see. My jaw went slack, and I don't think mine was the only one.

"Tao...", I said slowly, "Did the GMA say -anything- about the size of this operation?"

"Not. One. Thing," he said. I can only speak for myself, but I'd been expecting the facility to have a few dozen patients, maybe even a hundred or so. Instead, we were all treated to the sight of more cryogenic holding tubes than we could count stretching towards the back of a gargantuan holding chamber. Tubes and hoses trailed down from the walls and snaked across the floor to hook into chambers.

"Sweet merciful GOD," I said, "how many are there?!" Redwolf blinked, shaking off his own surprise, and tapped a few keys on the console she was standing at.

"Total count is...", she said, "...are you fucking KIDDING ME?"

"What?" I said, turning towards her. The drygerskunk looked up and locked eyes with me.

"Ten THOUSAND," she said.

I think we all simultaneously shit a brick right then. Complete silence reigned for about five seconds when suddenly, a flashing icon on the screen grabbed Redwolf's attention.

"Outside security's detected approaching vehicles, at least a dozen of them," she said.

"Shit, buggers 're goin' all aout," Mal said.

"If Quipple gets his hands on these people...", Azrial started to say, turning to look back down the hallway towards the elevator.

"...it'll be over my dead fucking body," I said, pulling my coach gun from the back holster I was wearing, slapping the fore grip into my other hand.

"Correction, over OUR dead fuckin' bodies," Bouncer rumbled. We all looked at each other; much like moment before Mal and I were going to make a stand in the door of his mansion, we all nodded to one another.

"Right," I said. "We've got to hold these bastards off until the military gets here. Mal, Red, you two need to get up with your respective groups, get them to get the lead out getting here or to be on standby, respectively. Bouncer, check the storage rooms and the labs, make sure there's no other way in besides that elevator. If you find anything, a ventilation shaft, a back door, block it with something heavy. Azrial, Tao, you two're with me; we're gonna go up and roll out the red

carpet."

The storm clouds that had been breaking up before had reformed. They didn't look dark enough to threaten rain again, but they provided a gray cloud cover from one edge of the horizon to the next. I took off my hat and used it to block the ankle-height laser that kept the elevators doors from closing on someone inadvertently; if we had to fall back, we didn't want to have to wait forever for the doors to open again.

The valley leading to the facility had several snake-like twists in it, providing us with some rocky cover to use. It would also ensure Quipple's men would have trouble supporting one another, in addition to being in single file.

"S'alot like the Greeks against the Persians at Thermopylae," Azrial said as we headed down the gravel road towards the first bend just a short distance from the front door. The vox blinked, then clenched his eyes shut, shaking his head as we exchanged pained looks.

"Bad example," he said.

"Bad example," I agreed, nodding. Tao chuckled, unslinging his rifle and checking the slide. We took up a position just behind a small rocky outcropping; Azrial lit up a cig, then took his rocket launcher off his shoulder and kneeled down, unzipping a duffel bag filled with five rockets. As he loaded it up, Tao and I took up positions on either side of him to provide him cover while he aimed. Since my coach gun wouldn't be that much help beyond a certain distance, I took out my revolver and propped myself up so I'd have a steady aim to put rounds as far downfield as possible.

We didn't have long to wait before we heard the sound of diesel engines and rolling tires. the next bend in the road was roughly a hundred yards (or close to a hundred meters, since we were in the UK) away. I made my customary last prayer before heading into what I knew would be serious trouble, and cocked back the hammer on my magnum; Tao pulled his rifle tight against his shoulder as Azrial thumbed the button for the laser guide on his launcher.

With a shuddering rumble, the first tractor trailer came into view around the corner. Nothing more than the cab had come into view when the vox said "Fire in the hole." A rocket hissed like an angry serpent, then went streaking across the distance between us and the truck, a trail of smoke coming from behind it like a streamer as it connected with the truck's cab, a fiery blast making us cringe a bit as the truck cab was reduced to burning wreckage and twisted metal.

We had a brief moment of stillness, which Azrial used to duck down and start reloading his launcher. Then all Hell broke loose. A half dozen thugs came scrambling over the top of the halted trailer, lead spraying in our direction. The thugs were clearly the cannon fodder being sent in first in the event anything dangerous - like security systems or US - had been waiting for Quipple's men. The thugs were no marksmen or skilled commandos like before; they fired off wildly, fanning their guns like idiots who based their fighting tactics off too many action movies and too many run-and-gun FPS games. Tao and I carefully lined up shots, sending the maniacs tumbling headfirst off the trailer or collapsing right on top of it. I'd only just stopped to reload

when I saw movement on the cliff face just behind the trailer; the attackers were sending in their mutant troops, and it looked like Quipple had saved his most revolting creations for last. The bastards bore only the slightest resemblance to their previous species, bearing gnarled, claw-tipped hands and footpaws that easily gripped the rough, steep surfaces they crawled across, covered with thick callouses, bony plates, and revolting, pulsating organs that started spewing those poison-tipped bone fletchettes Mal and I had seen back at his mansion. They tore through the air at us like long-range shot gun blasts, streaking just overhead. Some of them embedded in the rocks around us, and even from several feet away we could smell the rank stench of something toxic coming off the boney darts.

Tao lined up another shot, popping one of the four visible mutants right through his head. Another salvo of fletchettes came dangerously close to him, forcing him to duck down. It took me two shots to Tao's one, but two hollow point magnum slugs found their mark in a second mutant's torso, sending him rolling down the steep cliffside to the mud at the bottom. As we waited for the next cluster of thugs to charge us, the entire wreck of the truck suddenly lurched. The squeal of bending metal against metal came from the bend in the road as the demolished truck was hurled out of the way, a monster mutant bigger than we'd seen yet shoving it away. It looked like it had been a fur-bearing person at some point...but what species it used to be, I couldn't tell for all the hulking, callused-looking growths coming from a musculature so oversized it was downright deformed, twisting and knotting unnaturally. It only had patches of fur here and there and stood at least 20 feet tall, shaking the ground slightly with its lumbering gait. It turned towards us, took two charging steps...

...and then Azrial's second rocket met it right in the chest. The creature was hurled backward by the explosion that was close enough we could feel it shudder in our chests. But it worked; the monster was slammed against the rock wall on the far side of the canyon from us.

"Keep him busy!" the wox said, loading up another rocket. I wasn't sure at first if he was overestimating the monster's strength, but unfortunately, he was right. The creature slowly dragged itself from the heap it had crumpled into at the base of the cliff.

"Go for the face," I said to Tao. The wolfpede nodded, and we started slinging lead down range. The nightmare giant didn't even notice the shots that hit low on his body; they were no more effective than spitballs. But several of our slugs hit home on the creature's head. Those made it stop and swat at its face in irritation and pain. One of our slugs actually managed to hit the thing straight in the eye. THAT one made it clap both hands to its' head and let out a howl like a mutated wolf; that may've been what it was, at one time.

"Fire in the hole!" Azrial said as Tao and I had to stop to reload. A third rocket screamed through the air, and this time, as the creature tried to hurl itself at us with all its strength, it stumbled back two steps from the explosion, then dropped to its knees and then to its side; the additional blast had been enough to break through the creature's toughened exterior, and its chest had sustained catastrophic wounds.

"Oi, guys!" Mal's voice suddenly cracked over a loudspeaker from the building behind us. "Security's picked up a mass attack buildin', get'cher arses back down'ere!"

"One last card to play," Azrial muttered, reloading again. As he shouldered his rocket launcher, the sound of multiple voices, all sounding angry, all sounding savage, starting echoing off the canyon walls. But they were soon drowned out by two more explosions, one after the other. Aiming at the cliff face just above the road bend, Azrial used his last rockets to send a landslide of rock and dirt careening down into the gulley, burying the road under several feet of debris.

"That'll at least keep 'em from driving up to the door," he said. I nodded as we ran back to the elevator, getting in just in time; I yanked my hat off the security laser, Tao slapped the door button and the door slammed as two or three wild shots came from behind us, bouncing off the closing doors. All three of us panted for breath, but we knew we'd only seen the opening credits; the main act was yet to come.

Tao and I had reloaded by the time the elevator got to the bottom. Bouncer had been busy; after he'd blocked off a few vent shafts he found in the other rooms, he also dragged out some heavy benches and cabinets (in some places tearing them from their mountings) into the hall to act as cover and road blocks. We found the other half of our fellowship waiting for us behind the first of the three makeshift barriers. Red was on a communicator to the nearest Canmephian military base, while Mal was on his own to the local boys.

"Well make 'em GO FASTER!" Mal snarled into his smart phone. "We're 'bout t' get'our arses chewed off down'ere, so quit bum fuckin' ech'other an' sen'in th' fuukin' cavalry!" He angrily stabbed a finger at the screen, pocketed his device and picked up his tricked-out assault rifle.

"Fuck me," he sighed, "th' bloody milit'ry an' et's fewt-draggin', ah tell ye..." Red, meanwhile, was groaning and rolling hir eyes.

"Yes, I KNOW I'm not in immediate danger just yet," shi said, "but give it about TWO MINUTES and I'm gonna be getting SHOT AT. Now would you PLEASE prep two strike teams and get them ready to deploy on my coordin...hello? HELLO?!" The drygerskunk pulled hir communicator away from hir head and looked at it in frustration.

"Oh no," I groaned. "Don't tell me..."

"Jammed," shi said. Mal went over and picked up a tablet, tapping the screen. Apparently he'd put the device on the facility's internal network and used it to access the security system remotely.

"A'yup," he said, "They gaw'another one'a their ECM's out there." Redwolf looked at him curiously.

"Wait, electromagnetic jammer, right? That shouldn't affect my comm, it's..."

"...Quantum particle, right?" Mal finished for hir. Red nodded. "Aye, those things use electromagnets AND radio waves."

“Shit,” Redwolf said, clenching his eyes shut.

"So how come the camera's aren't down in this place?" I asked, looking at the elevator doors.

"Mus' be too well insulated, being further underground 'en th' ones in mah home," the dragonish guy said.

"Actually," said an unpleasantly familiar voice over the intercom system, "I had my boys set up just far enough away to leave the network here alone, but stop any incoming or outgoing signals."

"You again," Bouncer grumbled, looking around the hallway slowly. The rest of us did the same, finally locating the source of the voice; one of the loudspeakers, located close to a security camera. The camera's lens swiveled and refocused a bit, turning to look at us like a mantis turning its head.

"Ahh there you are. Well, gang's all here, it seems," Quipple said.

"How th' hell...," Azrial said, crossing his arms, but Quipple cut him off.

"My men brought their own remote wireless broadcast equipment," he said, "Makes long-distance hacking a snap for my team; only problem is it's bulky as hell to drag around, but in this case, it's worth it."

"Oh we're so flattered," Tao said with a snort.

"Well boys, I have to say, I'm amazed at how well you've done," Quipple said, ever-magnanimous. "It really does seem like a shame to shoot you down, or rip you apart, so lemme make one last plea to your reason."

"Don't you mean lack of reason?" Redwolf said, "Cause that's what it'd take to get us to want to deal with YOU."

"Ahhhhh, Admiral REDWOLF," Quipple said. "Wow, I mean...WOW. I've told the smilodon and that Mr. Geneford, wherever he is..." Bouncer started to say something, but I nudged him with an elbow and shook my head. Tao and Azrial looked with perplexed expressions at Mal, who just glanced towards them, momentarily put a finger to his lips, tapped the side of his nose, and then turned his attention back to Quipple's prattle.

"...that they'd be magnificent specimens, but YOU, oh man! I could catapult my research ahead with YOUR genetics at hand."

"In a PIG'S EYE," Redwolf snarled.

"Tsk, yyyeahhh," Quipple said, "It figures you'd say that. Buuut sorry to break it to you, I don't take no for an answer."

"Save your sociopathic shit for people that'll actually buy your crap, Quipple," I said, glaring at the camera. "We're not helping you, we're not getting out of your way, and we'll send anyone you throw at us back in a fucking body bag."

"Heh, the ol' last stand, eh?" Quipple chuffed. "Gotta say, you fellas have assembled quite the cast of archetypes for this...." The security camera panned to each of us one by one.

"The Officer," Quipple said, focusing on Redwolf. The drygerskunk narrowed his eyes at the camera.

"The Highlander," the doctor said, turning his camera's gaze to Mal. The dragonish Scotsman just gave the camera a mean grin, emphatically cocking his rifle.

"The Martial Artist," Quipple said, panning past me and focusing on Azrial. The vox took the stub of his cigarette out from between his teeth and flicked it at the camera.

"The Samurai," the doctor said, going next to Tao. The wolfipede sneered at the camera, pincers clicking together several times like he was contemplating sinking them into Quipple's neck, given the chance.

"The Bodyguard," Quipple said, his video gaze honing in on Bouncer. The smilodon cracked his knuckles loudly, popped his neck joints with a couple tilts of his head, and crossed his arms over his thrust-out chest.

"And finally, The Gunslinger," he said, panning back to me. Tilting my head up so I could see the camera just under the brim of my fedora, I cocked an eyebrow at it.

"It's a shame I have to kill you all," Quipple said, using that same "oh well" tone he had once before.

"You wish," I snorted, drew my revolver, and shot out the camera. The thrum of the elevator motors started up. Mal reached over to his tablet.

"Time t' kick arse," he said. "Ah save 'is one fer moments like this."

"Hmm?" Redwolf said, looking over at the dragonish guy. His answer came from the loudspeakers; it was another music track from that online shooter. I couldn't remember its name, but I had to hand it to Mal, it felt appropriate; a blend of techno-rock with sweeping orchestral tones as well. We readied our weapons; Mal, Tao and I shouldered our longarms, Azrial cocked both SMGs and pointed them ahead, Redwolf formed a minigun in his lower hands with his morphing abilities while a pair of .45 caliber Lugers emerged into his upper hands, held at port arms. Bouncer took up a defensive posture, ready for whatever made it past the bullet hell we were ready to unleash.

The elevator doors opened. It was empty.

"Eh?" I said.

"Bugger," Mal muttered, and started looking at the doors around us. Sure enough, heavy metallic crashes came from one of them as something began pounding at whatever heavy equipment Bouncer had used to block an air vent. The smilodon turned to face the direction the banging was coming from, the noise now mixed with vicious-sounding snarls and hisses. Sudden movement back towards the front grabbed our attention. A trio of mutant horrors came sliding down the elevator incline, reaching the bottom just as the lights flickered and plunged us into pitch darkness.

"Fuck!" Azrial said, as Mal clicked on a mounted flashlight on his rifle. The mutants hadn't stopped moving, using the darkness to their advantage, or trying to. We let loose on them, cutting them down quickly as emergency lighting flicked on. The reserve lights lit up the hallway adequately, but still left significant patches of shadows. From the open doorways of the storage rooms and labs, we could see the lighting in there was less than adequate.

"Arseholes mus' be playin' with the power," Mal said, turning to check his tablet. "Backup's on, patient's 're still safe, but we've los' outside security monitors an half th' emergency lights."

"Oh don't worry, they'll let us know what they're doing soon enough," Tao said with a wry smirk. A gang of no less than five attackers proved him right, thugs and freaks hurling lead and spitting acid in our direction. We held our ground, cutting them down one by one. But the last one fired several shots that hit the emergency lights nearest the elevator, blackening the inside of the shaft and the immediate threshold in a curtain of dark.

A shriek of metal came from the side and suddenly a creature covered in bone plates with a set of four limbs, two under each arm with venomous barbs not unlike a scorpion's tail, came screeching out of the shadows of the poorly-lit lab. Bouncer met him head on with a stamp kick, sending it backward just as those poisonous-looking limbs swiped a few inches from his face. The boney creature hit the floor, where it crouched a moment, hissing at the smilodon like a feral animal before lunging at him again. This time, Bouncer closed the gap quicker than the creature expected, lunging himself and slashing one hand, claws extended. The thing was thrown back again this time leaving a trail something unpleasant. It landed on its feet and staggered, but the smilodon wasn't giving it another chance to attack again. A horizontal swipe with his other hand and the creature tumbled over backward, collapsing and bleeding out in a matter of seconds.

Another abomination howling like a banshee came out of the darkness from the elevator shaft, launching itself though the air with a leap that bespoke leg strength like a grasshopper. Its ear-piercing scream was cut off abruptly as I brought it down with a coach gun blast. For a full two minutes, a pitched firefight went on, with the techno-rock opera music playing over it all. Twisted fanatics birthed from Quipple's experiments came at us from in front and both sides, only to be brought down by either our gunfire or our hand-to-hand blows. Bullets, bone darts, acidic spit all flew back and forth. It felt like the front line of the Argonne Forest; a seemingly endless number of the enemy and no relief in sight. Shell casings littered the floor around our footpaws; with the enclosed environment, the air became thick with the smell of gun smoke, acid

fumes, and spilled blood. Grim is the best word I can think of to describe it.

When a lull finally came, we'd taken down a full two dozen of Quipple's minions. I paused to wipe sweat from my eyes, leaning against the overturned counter I'd been using for cover, resting my head against the edge. The others were showing similar signs of fatigue; even Red, with his ability to fix himself from simple projectile attacks, still had to expend some energy to seal the holes back up when they got poked into his plasma-like body.

"God, when's it gonna END?" I whispered under my breath. He didn't answer....but someone else did. I heard a flittering noise from the elevator. I raised my head, and multiple clicks clattered across the cement floor as a true living nightmare emerged from the dark. The thing was easily as tall as Redwolf, though it walked on four legs attached to a lower abdomen. The thing looked primarily insect-based, with a dark brown exoskeleton. A humanoid face was attached to a head with multiple black eyes, numerous whip-like antennae or stingers coming out of its upper thorax. It closely resembled a mantis, but instead of a pair of folded arms, it had long, armor-covered humanoid limbs that ended in three-fingered hands, each finger at least three feet long and shaped like a serrated blade.

Mal grunted in exasperation, leveling his rifle at the thing and firing off a quick volley. But I think we all jolted in shock as we saw the thing jerk about four feet to the side, dodging the bullets so fast our eyes couldn't follow it. Looking at each other, we all yanked our guns up and started hammering away at the creature. But this insectoid monster was something more than just another of Quipple's experiments. It was a masterpiece of nightmarish genetic craftsmanship. It dodged and weaved through the hailstorm of lead with threw at it like we were in slow motion. It was dashing up and down the walls and along the ceiling in ways I'd only seen in the movies. With a suddenly leap, it went right over us so fast I couldn't follow it, reaching down and slashing with its claws. One caught me in the left shoulder and sliced through, laying my shoulder open to the bone. Mal caught one to his arm that he raised defensively, going down hard and clutching a forearm that bled like a stuck pig. Another claw caught Red in the face, but of course he sealed himself back up quickly, though looked plainly irritated by the blow. Tao, Azrial and Bouncer managed to flatten themselves against the floor or the wall to avoid the attack.

The creature wheeled around as it came to a stop some distance behind us. Bouncer, not wanting to give it a chance to get its momentum back, went barreling down the hall. He went toe to toe with the monster, but it batted his swipes away with blocking maneuvers with its arms. Then, two of the whip-like appendages came over its shoulders, cracking the smilodon like bullwhips. Bouncer cringed from the blows that gashed at his own shoulders and chest, taking one more swipe at the thing before it backhanded him hard enough to throw him backward about ten feet. From a stock-still stance, the monster was suddenly coming us again! This time we didn't even have time to get our guns up before it leapt over us, cracking at us with its tendrils. One cracked me across the back and I could feel it tear open a gash in my trench coat and chest, not to mention smack me like a piece of rebar getting beat against my back by an angry gorilla.

The blow dropped me to my knees. Looking around, I saw I wasn't the only one; Mal was clutching at one of his own shoulders where he'd taken a crack, and this time Azrial had one hand clapped to the side of his face and his arm wrapped around his chest.

"Son of a BITCH," Mal growled, glaring daggers at the creature. "Fucker's faster'n shite threw'a goose."

"Yeah," I said, then looked behind me. "Bouncer, you alright?"

"I'm gettin' there," The smilodon said, limping up. "How the hell're we gonna beat that THING?" The creature was leering at us mockingly; I had a feeling its last two attacks were just for show; now it was going to get serious.

"Red," I said, "Can you get a lock on it psychically?"

"Gahhh, it's too fast!" Red said, rubbing at three different spots where tendrils had cracked him, re-molding himself back into place. "I can't focus on it."

"Don't worry guys," Tao said. The wolfipede had been prone on the floor a moment before. But now, he straightened up, looking at the monster with calm determination.

"I've got this," he said. The wolfipede pushed back his hood, climbing over the barricade with his lower body, his armored segments seeming to glide gracefully over it. He turned and handed me his rifle.

"You sure about this?" I said, taking the firearm nonetheless.

"Oh I think I've got his number," Tao said. The monster must have overheard, because it tilted its head at a slight angle, then let out a wheezing, hissing laugh as it saw Tao intended to take him on alone. The wolfipede wove his lower body along in a serpentine pattern as he drew slightly closer to the insectoid mutant, which stood once more at the far end of the hallway. Coming to a stop, the wolfipede stood still, staring down his opponent. With one hand, he took hold of the sheath of his katana, thumb pushing the hilt to free it.

The greasy smirk on the creature's face slowly dropped. Joking was done; now it was all business again. The thing slowly drew back its arms, tips of its deadly fingers pointed in Tao's direction. The wolfipede took hold of his sword's grip.

If this had been a martial arts movie, the two of them would have charged at one another, attacked, then come to a halt, backs to one another, waiting a few seconds to see who would fall. Well, that's the movies, so it didn't happen that way.

But it was close.

Tao and the creature stared each other down for what seemed like forever, the rest of us watching with baited breath. Nothing on the wolfipede moved, except for his antennae. Those appendages on top of his head swiveled and twitched, as if they were reading the air like a secret code. Suddenly, the monster was on the move, zig zagging left and right, up and down, off the walls. Tao blitzed forward with speed I never would have imagined anyone could be born with. The

two seemed to go into a spiral pattern as they charged, up the walls, across the ceiling, down the other wall, across the floor...suddenly, the monster launched itself down from the ceiling, twisting around in the air in a lunge, as Tao hurled himself upward, lashing out with his sword!

There was a large gout of blood that splattered against the wall. The creature had just swiped its arms over Tao's head, while the wolfipede had caught the thing square across the middle of its thorax. The katana cut through the monster's body, immediately spraying its blood and sending it to the floor in two pieces. Tao landed a slight distance away from the twitching corpse, panting slightly; his sword arm was still held out to his side, the blade dripping with blood.

The wolfipede slowly relaxed himself, cleaning the blade with a swipe to fling the blood off in a narrow spray, then turned back toward us. We'd been silent for a few seconds after the creature's defeat. That ended quickly.

"AH'RIGHT!" Bouncer yelled.

"WOOOO!" Azrial howled.

"LOOKOUT!" Mal shouted, and Tao just managed to get his sword up to block a pair of lashing tendrils coming out of the darkness from another mutant. Quipple's monsters weren't going to give us long to celebrate; the whip-like appendages wrapped around Tao's blade, a third one coming out of the dark, aimed for his head as the thug they were attached to marched forward out of the dark of the elevator shaft. I raised up Tao's rifle, took aim and put two rounds through the thug's chest; it went down, tendrils releasing the wolfipede's katana, as no less than eight more of Quipple's minions and abominations came out of the shadows. Then we heard the sound of fists and claws hammering on metal coming from two more of the rooms with blocked-off vents.

"FALL BACK!" I yelled, tossing Tao his rifle as he regrouped with us. Bullets and other, nastier projectiles flew towards us as we retreated as far as the next barrier. As we began backpedaling, Mal reached into his trench coat, pulling a gray, brick-shaped block out of an inner pocket. He pulled a cellophane wrapper off the back of it, exposing a sticky adhesive surface and pressing it to the floor just behind the first barricade, then thumbed an electronic device on the block that sent up a narrow red laser. I'm no soldier or explosives expert, but I know a trip line when I see one.

"G'back-g'back-g'back..." Mal said, quickly backing away from the trap. We all jumped behind the next covering wall as the twisted mutants surged forward after us. We just had time to clap hands over ears and duck down as the single-minded group jumped the barrier, and an explosive BANG that we felt as much as we heard went off. We looked over the top of the second barricade, seeing a lot of cement dust in the air and debris littering the hall; debris that was metallic, mineral and...organic. I couldn't help but wince slightly as I reloaded, the voices and snarls coming from down the hallway telling me the attack still wasn't over. A new firefight began, this time with more of our assailants trying to rush us from the sides. With Bouncer on one side, holding the skirmishers at bay, Azrial broke off from the front line to cover the other. He fanned his SMGs at a trio of commandos, taking down two before the clips emptied. With no

time to reload, the vox launched himself through the air at the last one, doing a similar set of dance-like kicks to the thug before delivering a kick to the side of his head that snapped it to the side violently, dropping him to the floor in a limp heap.

The prolonged attack was beginning to take its toll on all of us. Armored as we were, we were still taking damage. A bullet here, a cut there, a chemical burn now and then, we began racking up wounds. By the time we'd taken down at least another 15 or so of Quipple's men and monsters, five of us were bruised and bleeding and even Redwolf was looking like shi was running out of strength to keep patching himself up. Then the attackers broke off abruptly.

"Shit," I said, shoving two new shot gun shells into my coach gun and snapping it shut. "Never a good sign." A heavy, lumbering thud sent a tremor down the corridor I could feel through my footpaws. Pops and cracks came from down the hallway. The creature coming forward was so big, it had to move on all fours like a feral ape, intermittently knocking lights off the wall. It looked like some kind of bovine or ungulate, with a set of four forward-curving horns, two from its temples, two under its jaws. Its musculature was so overdeveloped, it had actually torn through its skin in certain places, exposing raw sinew and muscle fibers. The creature slathered out of a sneering mouth, its eyes dead white and lacking any semblance of rational thought. Redwolf leveled his minigun at the thing, peppering it with bullets, but the juggernaut monster didn't even acknowledge them. It snorted like a bull, opened its mouth and let out a bellow of pure, primal rage as it came down the hall at us like a freight train.

As the charging creature got closer, we scrambled back to the last barrier, but the behemoth crashed through the second one like it was wet cardboard. It was bearing down on us so fast we hadn't been able to get over the top. It hauled back a pair of huge fists, ready to start smashing us against the floor....

...and then with a mountain lion roar that almost made the walls shake, Bouncer went flying directly into the creature's path. What happened next made me think of the novel Quo Vardis, where Ursus protected Lygia in Nero's arena from a wild bull with his bare hands. The smilodon caught the creature's hands at the wrists, sinking his claws into them. The creature bellowed into Bouncer's face; the smilodon's entire body shuddered with the herculean effort it took to hold back the monster. His knees started to bend, almost touching the ground with one. Every chord of Bouncer's muscles seemed to stand out in relief; he burst the straps of his armor from flexing so hard, his tank top beneath already shredded to nothing. Every cut on him that was deep enough his healing factor hadn't sealed it up yet bled freely, mixing blood into the sweat that coursed down his body.

The smilodon looked like his body was about to explode from the pressure of his own straining and that of the nightmarish hulk pressing down on him. Then, with a slow shift, the smilodon twisted and SLAMMED the monster's head and shoulders down against the floor. The creature, dazed, tried to push itself back up, but Bouncer was on top of it in an instant. The hulking feline slung an arm around the thing's thick neck in a headlock, and with another mountain lion roar, he wrenched it HARD at an angle. A crack like a tree trunk as it's falling came from the horned beast, and it collapsed in a heap.

Bouncer slowly released the creature from his arm. The smilodon sucked ragged, hard breaths from the air as he leaned heavily against the wall. We all jumped the barrier and moved to support him, but hadn't more than arrived at his side when a slow, sardonic clap echoed down the hallway from the direction of the elevator. A figure stepped into the light. It was about Bouncer's height, had a triangular build to its impressive (but not freakishly overdeveloped) muscles, but four arms like Redwolf. A broad head of reptilian design crowned the torso. It looked like the creature had thick, dark red plating on the back of its body, while its underside was the dull yellow of old paper. It wore a pair of cameo cargo pants and a belt with a metallic buckle. Clawed footpaws that seemed to blend both saurian and avian features, namely an extra claw on the heel and a look like it could be used to grip a perch, emerged from the pant legs.

"I see what the doctor meant when he said it's a shame it's come to this," the chimera-like creature said in a smooth, but harsh voice. "You've held out against some of our best. But it's over now."

"Psh," I snorted. "I've heard that before."

"Not from ME," the creature said, quirking an eye ridge, still grinning sardonically at us.

"And what're you, teacher's pet?" Azrial snorted. The four-armed thing turned towards the wox.

"No...I'm perfection," it said, and spit a small glob of acid in the wox's direction. Azrial leaned to one side to avoid it, bringing up his SMG to let loose a volley. The creature turned its back to him, the slugs bouncing off the plating. The pseudo-chimera chuckled as the wox lowered his weapon.

"If Quipple's already made you perfect," I said, "What's he need these patients for? Sounds like he's work's done."

"So the doctor can make MORE perfection," the creature said, turning back to face me. "And so he can come up with new innovations to keep me and those like me perfect. Part of perfection is being able to grow and change."

"If there's something you don't have that you need, doesn't that technically mean you're NOT perfect?" Redwolf said, arching a brow of his own. The creature went a bit contemplative for a moment.

"Perhaps," it said. "In which case, let's say I'm as close to perfect as one can get right now. But soon enough, I WILL be COMPLETELY perfect."

"Nah," Mal said, "Soon enough, yer gonna be DEAD." With that, we started blasting away at the creature, who put up all four arms to protect itself, crouching slightly. A heavy thrum suddenly started coming from it, and without warning, a heavy shockwave of sound suddenly burst forth from it as it threw its arms open, knocking all of us on our asses with the blast. Redwolf tilted his head down and glared daggers at the creature, which was lifted up by its neck briefly. But the pseudo-chimera wasn't fazed by it; it just sneered at Redwolf as the drygerskunk tried to choke it

with telepathy. Suddenly, a reptilian tail whipped in his direction, firing off several of those venomous darts we'd come to expect from several of Quipple's freaks. They streaked towards Red faster than he could catch, and embedded themselves in his face.

Redwolf reached up with a hand and yanked the darts out...but then we discovered whatever that venom was, it was caustic, because the drygerskunk suddenly released the creature, his concentration broken as he clapped two hands to his face and began howling in pain and cussing a blue streak. The creature continued to sneer at us, and from its back, from underneath a couple of its armored plates, a set of thin, membranous wings extended. They buzzed to life, sounding like an industrial fan as the creature lifted itself up off the ground at a hover.

I'd been thrown back slightly further than the others. The creature was focusing its attention on the group, looking like it was preparing to bathe them in a larger stream of acid or some other form of widespread attack. I'd had enough; I'd dragged the others into this mess, so if that thing wanted to pick a fight with someone who was already beat up, it could try me on for size. I pulled myself up, shoved my coach gun into my back holster, and took aim with my revolver. My slug nailed the creature in the side, causing it to snarl in pain; but apparently even on its soft side, it was tough enough that not even a shock hollow point could bring it down. It could hurt it and piss it off, but not kill it; not by itself.

It wanted more? I had PLENTY.

"C'MON YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE FREAK!" I hollered at Quipple's prized creation. "TAKE YOUR BEST FUCKING SHOT!" The thing snapped its head towards me and suddenly a huge gout of flame erupted from its muzzle towards me. I leaped back as the spot I'd been standing was drenched in fire.

"I'M STILL STANDING, FUCKWAD!" I yelled at the top of my lungs, adrenaline driving me to the brink of losing control. I shot at it again, but this time the bullet bounced off the creature's plating. "GET OVER HERE SO I CAN GRIND YOU UNDER MY HEEL, YOU MISERABLE INSECT!" I bellowed. That got its attention; the monster glared at me with a look that said he was now tunnel visioned on stamping me out. That was both a good thing...and a bad one.

Completely ignoring the others, the creature let loose another shockwave; but this time, it was a focused, funneled blast that sent me and me alone flying backward through the control room door, slamming into the control panel. I tried to ignore the hammering pain in my side where I connected with the panel and fired off another shot, then ran towards a side door in the control room that led out onto a catwalk that went around the patient storage chamber. I heard Quipple's masterpiece buzz into the control room behind me. A stream of acid went over my shoulder, several droplets burning the back of my head and neck painfully. Most of it missed me, which was good. What wasn't so good was how it hit the catwalk ahead of me, weakening the supports. With a metallic groaning, the walkway lurched under my weight as I failed to stop myself in time. It dropped down at an angle, sending me sliding down to the floor below.

Mal's mood music, set on a loop, had just begun to pick up momentum. It added a poetic flare to the moment as the pseudo-chimera emerged from the control room like a wasp buzzing out of its

nest. Scrambling back to my footpaws, I shot at it again, bouncing a slug off its armor plating as it dove at me. I took off at a dead run, dodging to the side as I ran into the veritable forest of cryo chambers. I heard the telltale clatter of bone darts across concrete as the creature pulled back up. It started flying in a circle pattern around the chamber, searching for the right moment and angle to dive at me. As for me, I was trying to stay on the move, only stopping when I was running short of breath. Wounds felt like they were taking their toll; I had bruises from blows, gunshots that didn't penetrate my armor, cuts from claws and burns from acid. It all added up to make me feel like I'd been put through a rock tumbler.

But I knew this thing couldn't be allowed to win. I knew QUIPPLE couldn't be allowed to win.

I emptied my revolver's cylinder at the creature, missing once and seeing the slugs bounce off his plating the rest of the time. Ducking behind a chamber as the monster tried to flame broil me with another diving attack, I reloaded, then hung up my revolver; it wasn't the tool for the job.

"Time to unleash the boomstick," I muttered, drawing my coach gun. I heard the buzzing getting closer; the monster was getting ready to flank me. I took off at a run to get a better vantage point, just in time for a salvo of darts to fly my way. One nailed me in the thigh, almost tripping me as a venom sent a burning, itching pain through my leg. I gasped and yelled in pain, yanking the boney thorn out of my leg and lurched down a different row of chambers.

Back against one of the tubes, I fought to ignore the pain and think. I had to take away this creature's advantage; namely, the high ground.

"Okay then," I said to myself. "Let's bull fight." I stepped around the corner, looking up. Quipple's masterpiece was hovering in one spot, looking for me.

"HEY!" I shouted at it, getting its immediate attention. The abomination grinned savagely at me, and started coming straight at me, arms held crossed in front to block any shots I took. I waited until he was almost level with me...then spun on my heel back behind a cryo chamber, just as the creature dropped its guard to blast a fiery fountain just where I'd been standing. As the creature moved past and started to pull out of its dive, I shouldered my coach gun, took aim, and let loose with both barrels at the monster's back.

The creature went crashing to the floor as the shot tore through its wings.

Rolling like a car T-boned in an accident, Quipple's monster went spinning across the floor, coming to a stop after slamming against the far wall. There, it laid motionless...but I wasn't buying it. I broke open my coach gun and reloaded. My grip was tight on my gun as I slowly approached the creature's body. It still lay without moving, but I was sure it was a trap; I just wanted to get close enough my shot would be able to break through that armor. A stopping about eight or so feet away, I thumbed the safety off and shouldered my gun again.

Suddenly, the creature lunged, coming just under the blast as I pulled the trigger. Shot ricocheted off the floor where it had been as the monster caught me on the chin with an uppercut that threw me backward several feet.

"You little BASTARD!" the thing snarled at me, its eyes burning as hot as its breath. With one hand, it clutched at a wing that dangled limp and shredded from its back. The others were in similar states, one of them twitching involuntarily.

"I'm going to kill you by INCHES," Quipple's creature said, teeth bared and grinding. It bore down on me, and I raised up my coach gun, aimed it right at the monster's chest and fired. The creature, however, managed to get its arms up in time, though it was staggered back as the thudding report of my shot gun echoed through the storage chamber. That gave me just enough time to drag myself off my ass and take off at a staggering run before I heard Quipple's masterpiece winding up an attack. I threw myself sideways just in time to avoid a stream of acid that splashed along the floor. My one thought at the time was to put distance between me and that thing, so I ran heedlessly through the rows of cryo chambers, stopping only briefly to reload. Behind me, I could hear the monster easily keeping pace with me, though it sounded like it wasn't sure exactly where I was, having lost sight of me. It was still confident, still cocksure of its victory.

I'll make you regret that, I thought to myself. I'll find a way to make that bite you in the ass.

I got all the way to the very back of the storage chamber. Panting and sucking chest-burning breaths into my lungs, I realized I couldn't hear the creature's footsteps anymore. Feeling like it's eyes were on me right at that moment, I wheeled around, coach gun shouldered, looking to the tops of the cryo tubes.

Nothing behind me, nothing above me. I stood stock still for several seconds, listening, sweat dripping down my cheeks, waiting for an ambush. I slowly took a few steps back towards the end of the row I was in, turning around.

That's when two fists came around the side of the last chamber in the row. One smashed me in the chest, the other bloodied my nose. I went stumbling backwards, grabbing at the smooth side of one of the cryo chambers before I collapsed on my ass again. Quipple's masterpiece slowly stepped around the side of the chamber, looking down at me as I pushed myself backward across the floor, blinking hard and trying to get my head to stop swimming. I looked left and right; I was boxed in, the thing was too close as it sneered at me, drawing closer to finish me off. And I certainly looked finished; nowhere to go, no ace in the hole...then, I saw inspiration. I knew what to do.

With one arm, I pointed my coach gun at the creature. It stopped, looking disbelievingly at me, and scoffed.

"Seriously? After all this?" Quipple's masterpiece rolled its eyes, shook its head, raised up all four hands and dropped them with a sigh in a gesture of hopelessness, then folded its armored arms over its chest and looked down at me in bemusement.

"Fine. Go ahead," it said. "In your own words: 'take your best fucking shot.'"

"Alrigh'," I said, my voice thick from my nosebleed. I put my finger to the trigger. Then I turned my coach gun to the side and blasted the coupling where a hose marked "LIQUID NITROGEN" hooked into one of the cryo chambers. The creature followed my aim as I changed it; it just had time to look surprised as a huge gush of freezing chemical sprayed out at it like water out of a hydrant. A warning light started flashing on the tube, and automated repair systems quickly cut off the flow of nitrogen. But it wasn't fast enough for Quipple's abomination. The creature's look of shock was frozen on its face, along with the rest of its upper body as permafrost settled in all over its torso. I pulled myself up, wiping my nose across the back of one hand, and put my coach gun to my shoulder, aiming down the barrel with a glare.

"Here's my best shot," I said. I let loose with the second barrel. The abomination's head exploded into frozen shrapnel. Then, from the side, another shot gun report came as a large chunk of the monster's frozen upper body was blasted apart. Several hand gun reports joined in, taking out fist-sized chunks from the remaining torso until finally, the monster's lower body fell over backward to the floor.

I looked to the side, both weary and curious. Around the corner, Mal and Redwolf emerged, the former racking out an empty shell from his sawed off pump action, the latter ejecting empty mags from his LUGERS.

"Always wanna be sure," Mal said, grinning. I let out a weak hyena chuckle, lowering my gun. A static squawk from the remains of the not-so-perfect monstrosity suddenly drew out attention. It took a heart-stopping moment before we realized it was a radio. I went over and fished the radio off the back of the creature's belt.

"Omega!" a voice said over the radio, "We're getting hammered from behind! It's the Royal Army and the CMC! We can't hold out, we've got to scrap the mission! Omega! Answer me, ARE YOU THERE?!"

"Cavalry's finally here," Redwolf said.

"Good," I said. "I think a line from H.P. Lovecraft is appropriate here." I squeezed the radio's call button.

"Fool," I said into the radio, "Omega is DEAD."

"Wha? You.." The other voice said breathlessly. "FUCK!" Red, Mal and I exchanged grins as I tossed the radio away.

"C'mon," the drygerskunk said, tossing his head towards the front of the chamber. "Let's go greet the troops."

"Late to th' party as they are...", Mal said, shrugging. I started to follow them, when I heard a mechanical whirring. Turning around, I saw an intercom panel with a video display and vid cam on the wall between two sets of cryo chambers. I had a good idea who was on the other end as I walked up to the wall, leaned against it and looked right into the camera lens.

"I told you we weren't going to let you win," I said.

"Well, I have to say, you guys certainly proved tougher than I expected," Quipple said, still not ordaining to show his face. There was a change in his voice, however. He didn't sound so magnanimous or easy-going anymore. He sounded...testy.

"I suppose congratulations are in order," the doctor said, sounding rather tight-lipped. "You bunch have managed to do something that few others have. You've pissed me off."

"I tend to do that to a lot of people," I said. "Can't speak for the others, though."

"Mmm," Quipple said. "Well you all certainly have this time." The doctor let out an exasperated sigh. "All that potential, all those fresh supplies; what a waste."

"PEOPLE are not SUPPLIES," I said. "But I've given up expecting you to understand that."

"Same as I've given up expecting you to grow a brain," Quipple snorted back at me. "But hey, there's be other opportunities, as well as opportunities for me to make you and your little cronies pay for this interference."

"HEY!" I snapped at the doctor, stabbing a finger at the camera. My teeth clenched, my anger rose, and in spite of feeling like I could collapse at any moment, I was ready to pick another fight.

"You dig your ears out and you listen REAL WELL," I growled into the camera. "If you so much as lay a FINGER on any of the others, I swear to Almighty GOD, I will dedicate myself to hunting you down and when I do, I will Take. My. Time. with you as I send you TO HELL."

"Tch, wow," Quipple scoffed. "You sure get attached fast, don't you? 'Specially since most of those guys you haven't known that long."

"Friends are important to me," I said, pushing away from the wall. "Especially kindred spirits."

"Oi! Mike! Y'comin?!" I heard Mal yell from some distance off. I turned and started towards his voice.

"I'll be seeing you again," Quipple said over the intercom. "We're not done yet, you hear me?"

I just flipped the bird as I walked away.

"Wot's that alla'bout?" Mal asked as I rejoined him and Redwolf.

"Eh," I said with tired shrug, "just exchanging parting barbs with our erstwhile opponent."

"Ugh," Redwolf grunted as we resumed our walk to the other side of the storage chamber. "We're

not rid of him yet, are we?"

"Oh no," I said, chuckling despondently. "I think we're going to have to look forward to Quipple putting in another appearance someday."

"Naw'ef ah'cn help 'et," Mal said. "Ahm puttin' mah people onnis case firs' thing. We'll run his arse daown an' back over 'et a few times fer gewd measure."

"You ever need my help with that, just give me a jingle," I said.

"Oh aye," He said. "An' remin' me t' give ye m'private number; gotta feelin' we'll be seein' each other a fair bit."

"Oh definitely," I said. "You and I still need to have a rematch."

We took the short lift back up to the hallway, where things were finally quiet again. Amid the debris and remains of the fight, Tao, Azrial and Bouncer stood, sat and leaned against the wall. All of us were battered, bloodied, but triumphant. We sheathed, holstered and stowed our weapons and equipment, picked our way through the hallway towards the elevator. As Redwolf fiddled with the control panel on the wall to undo some of the hacking damage the attackers had done, Tao pulled out his smartphone and made a call.

"Hey, it's me..." he said. "Yep, we found it....yeah, that was us...I know, never imagined it'd go like this either...can you get in touch with the Royal Military? Good, they should be able to tell you where to go. Great, see you when I get back." The wolfipede hung up his phone.

"GMA's gonna send a heavy duty medical team to respond to this," he said. "We'll start pulling patient records, getting these people to proper treatment centers."

"Good," I said, "case closed then." The elevator's engines hummed to life again where they'd been shut down before. As we stepped onto the platform and it began to rise, I turned and borrowed Mal's tablet. It was still connected to the facility's network, so I quickly accessed the external loudspeakers, brought up a music library, and found what I was looking for. I handed the tablet back to Mal as we reached the top; the dragonish guy cocked his head to one side, looking at the tablet, then grinned at me and shook his head as he slipped it back into his coat. With all of us standing in a line, backlit by the lift's floodlights, the doors opened to a mixed crowd of both Earth and Canmephian military, everyone looking at us with a mix of shock and awe as the music played.

HERE WE ARE! BORN TO BE KINGS, WE'RE THE PRINCES OF THE UNIVERSE!

HERE WE BELONG! FIGHTING TO SURVIVE, IN A WORLD WITH THE DARKEST POWERS!

As Freddy Mercury and Queen did what they do best, the six of us stepped out of the elevator and started down the path. There was still work to be done, but that was for someone else; our

mission was complete.

ANOTHER CASE CLOSED.
BUT IT'S NOT THE LAST.
FANG WILL RETURN AGAIN.

